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G R I F ;
A STORY OF AUSTRALIAN LIFE.

GRIFF;

A Story of Australian Life.

BY

B. L. FARJEON.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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GRIFF;

A STORY OF AUSTRALIAN LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

A HOT DAY IN MELBOURNE.

A HOT, scorching day. The winds having travelled over hundreds of miles of arid plain and smoking bush, floated into Melbourne, laden with blazing heat. The sky glared down whitely, and the blinding sun scorched up moisture and vegetation with its eye of fire. The very clouds were white with heat, and to look up at them made one dizzy. In the city, mankind panted with thirst and fatigue, and, regardless of consequences, revelled, inordinately and greedily, in ices and cool drinks. Womankind retreated to cellars and shady nooks, and, divested of superfluous attire, indulged, gratefully, in water-melons ; and mankind, coming home wearied and parched, joined womankind in her

retreat, and lay at her feet, tamely. Dogkind panted, and lolled out its tongue, distressfully ; but though it wandered in despair through the streets, it found no relieving moisture in kennel or gutter ; and being, by its constitution and laws, debarred from the luxury of ices and cool drinks, it endured agonies of silent suffering. Clerks fell asleep over their ledgers, and storekeepers grew dozy behind their desks. At the seaside the very waves were too wearied to roll, and lay, supine, beneath the dreadful glare of the sun. The beaches were deserted : not even a crab was to be seen. In the country, the bush smoked and blazed, and wretched oxen strained at their chains, and did their half-a-mile an hour in dire distress. With suffering noses 'almost touching the ground, they smelt in vain along the earth for liquid life. The drivers with their cabbage-tree hats slouched over their eyes, were too lazy to crack their whips, and too fatigued to swear loudly at their cattle ; but, determined not to be cheated of their privilege, they growled and cursed in voices almost inaudible. The leafless trees smoked beneath the glare of the sun, and stretched their bare branches to the sky as if for pity, but got none. On the goldfields, diggers stripped to their shirts, and were glad to hide them-

selves at the bottom of deep pits, with bottles of lager beer or cold tea by their side ; those who could find no such shelter threw themselves upon their rough beds, and longed eagerly for the night. Everywhere, business, except where bare-armed men or muslin-clad barmaids served long drinks to thirsty souls, was at a standstill. Merchants were too lazy to haggle. Percentages were forgotten, and invoices disregarded. Even Zachariah Blemish, dressed in white linen from the top of his head to the sole of his foot, and looking, with his rubicund face, like a white and pink saint, ready and fit to fly heavenward, lolled idly in his sanctum, and refreshed himself with hock and seltzer water. The conjugal Nuttalls were in the deepest misery. The head of the family, Nicholas Nuttall, was in his dressing-room, pouring jugsful of cold water over his head, as if he were afraid of its taking fire : and, directing his eyes to the bed, beheld thereupon the partner of his bosom, whose face was puffed up with mosquito bites, and who, glaring reproachfully at her husband, said as plainly as eloquent looks could speak, Fiend ! behold your handiwork ! Walls and pavement were smoking ; and all nature, excepting the flies and the fishes, was in a state of misery. The blazing wind was comparable to nothing but the

blast from a fiercely-heated furnace, and high and low succumbed to its power.

High and low ! Ay, even down to Old Flick, who, in the back-room of his All-Sorts Store, in Old Flick's Thoroughfare, gasped, and growled, and cursed, as he drank his rum-and-water. Old Flick was attired in shirt, trousers, and slippers. Nothing more. His shirt was open at the bosom, thereby displaying a sinewy chest, covered with dirty gray hair ; and was tucked up to the shoulders, showing his lean and bony arms. He was not a pleasant object to look upon, with his straggling hair, and his blotched face, and his bloodshot, bleary eyes. One might have wondered while looking upon him, Was this man ever a child, and was he ever blessed with a mother's love ? One might have so wondered, and, doubting, might have been pardoned for the doubt. For indeed he looked terribly sinful and depraved : a very blot upon humanity. Sitting and drinking, and growling, he became conscious of a shadow before him, and looking up and seeing the girl Milly, who had just entered the room, he made a motion as if he would like to spring upon her. She, too, was not pleasant to look upon ; for she also had been drinking, and her eyes were bloodshot. Her hair was hanging

loosely about her face, and she had a reckless and defiant manner which almost unwomanised her.

“What do you want?” growled Old Flick.

She did not answer him for many moments. She had come there for a purpose, and she knew she was not fit for it, and that she was no match for the crafty man who sat before her. Milly's condition was very pitiable. She depended upon Jim Pizey for support, and she had not received a line from him since his departure from Melbourne. He had left her without wishing her good-bye, but he had sent her a message that Old Flick would give her money when she required it. Depending upon this, when she wanted funds she had applied to the old man, but getting a few shillings from him was like squeezing life's blood from his heart. The process was such a sickening one to Milly, that she had lately but seldom attempted it. He had so wearied her with his whining protestations, that she had not applied to him for assistance for a long time; but now necessity was driving her hard. There was another reason besides the want of money, which induced Milly to visit Old Flick at the present time. He had, she knew, received a letter from Jim, and she wanted to read it. You see, Jim was the only rock the poor girl had to cling to.

As for Old Flick, the sight of Milly was torture to him. He thought he had got rid of her for good, and here she was to torment him again. He knew what she wanted well enough — money, money, always money! But he would not give her a doit — not a doit! He did not think that part of Milly's purpose was to get Jim's letter; he was not aware that she knew he had received one. His tribulation would have been sore indeed had he suspected that; for there was something in the letter about Milly which would be enough to drive her mad. "I wish she would die!" he muttered, inly. "What's the use of her? Why don't she die?" If he could, he would have killed her with a look.

"What do you want?" he growled again.

She seized the bottle from the table, and placed it to her lips. Old Flick did not attempt to restrain her. Indeed, he was frightened of her.

"I want money!" Milly exclaimed, with a kind of drunken scream.

"The old cry!" he screamed, in return.

"Yes, the old cry. You thought you weren't going to hear it again, eh! I want money!"

"I haven't any."

"Lies!" she exclaimed. "You're rolling in it. You've enough to fill your grave. I want money."

"You're a pretty article to want money," said Old Flick, with a sneer. "Go and earn it."

"Don't say that again, Flick," said the girl, with a threatening flash in her eyes, "or I'll tear your liver out! Oh, I don't care for your looks! What do you think I've got in me to-day?"

"I don't know, and I don't care," he replied.

"I've got the devil in me!" she cried. "Mind how you let it loose. I feel it here—here!" and she drew her hand, with a nervous twitching of the fingers, across her forehead. "I try to deaden it to sleep with drink, but it won't rest. It dances in my brain, and laughs at me through my eyes! Oh! you're frightened at my talk, are you? What wonder! I'm frightened at it myself."

"You want rest, Milly," the old man said, with a sort of lame compassion in his voice.

"Rest!" she echoed, bitterly. "What rest can I expect or do I deserve? What did I come here for?" she asked herself, in a confused, wandering manner. "I came here to ask you for something, Flick. Not money alone; no, no! something else. I have it!" she steadied herself in an instant. "The letter!"

"The letter!" he repeated, his face turning ashen white.

"The letter!" she reiterated. "The one you received from Jim Pizey yesterday. You have a lie ready! I see it trembling on your lips. Send it back, and mind it don't choke you! Where's the letter?"

"I haven't it," he answered, knowing at the same time that it was useless to deceive her.

"Where's the letter?"

"I've burnt it."

"You are a liar!" she said, quietly, looking steadily at him.

"You're drunk!" he cried, in a voice thick with passion. "If you don't go away I'll set the police on you."

"Do!" she replied, laughing scornfully, "and I'll tell them who you are in league with. Who do you think they will believe? You or me? You'll set the peelers on me, will you? You worn-out parcel of bones, it's more than your soul's worth—though that's not worth much. I'll tell them that you are in league with two of the biggest scoundrels in the colony. And I'll prove it too. You shall go out of here into quod, and out of quod into hell, Old Flick! You'll set the peelers on me, will you? Shall I call 'em in?" and she moved towards the door.

He threw one of his evil looks upon her, and, in his shaking voice, told her to stay where she was.

"Give me some drink," exclaimed Milly, taking the bottle as she spoke, and drinking from it again. "Do you know what I am going to do, Flick?" she asked, her mood suddenly changing. "I'm going to kill myself with drink."

"All the better," he growled.

"Right you are!" she returned, recklessly. "I'm tired of my life. It's time I was dead! Look here, Flick; if you don't tell where Jim is, I'll set the place about your ears."

"I don't know," he whined; "how should I know? What's the use of asking me where he is? I know nothing about him. He wrote me a letter, but you don't think he put his address in it, do you? You ought to know him better than that, Milly!"

"You miserable gray-head, ain't you afraid that your lies will choke you? Ain't you afraid of dying? What an old sinner you are! Do you ever think of the worms creeping over your ugly carcase, and gloating over you when you are in your grave? Do you ever think of the cold slimy earth falling on your face through the coffin, and sucking all the hope out of you, even after you are dead? Ain't you afraid when you think of it? I am! I

am!" she exclaimed, with a shuddering shriek; "or I should have killed myself long ago!"

The drunken old man's face twitched with terror as she spoke these dreadful words, and he whined piteously, "Don't, Milly, there's a good girl. Talk of something pleasant."

"I haven't the courage to do it," she continued, in a musing tone, not heeding his remonstrance. "I have thought of it often—have dreamt of it often. I have woke up in the night and seen it looking at me, from the foot of the bed—my thought, that seemed to be all eyes, and no shape. It speaks to me, and I can never hear it; it clings about me, and I can never feel it. It takes me through the dark streets to the water side, and I look down and see the stars bidding me come—I see the shadows of the trees moving about at the bottom—and then, and then," she said, shudderingly, "I see myself lying in the mud, and things crawling over me—and I run away, I run away!"

Old Flick moved nearer to the wall, and regarded her with cowardly fear.

"If I wasn't afraid of that," she continued, "I should have been out of the world long before now. I bought some poison one day, and was very near taking it. But I got such a fit of shaking all at

once, that I threw it on the floor, and stamped on it, and ran away, mad with fright. Did you ever try to take poison, Flick? Pour it in a glass, and look at it for a moment, and you see a lot of devils glaring at you and clutching at you, and you feel a lot of creeping things dancing in your brain, and stirring in your hair, and tingling at your fingers' ends!"

Old Flick shook with fear now, and not with ague. "Don't talk like that, Milly," he cried again, looking fearsomely about him; "do talk of something pleasant."

"Something pleasant!" Milly exclaimed. "What have I got pleasant to talk about? I wish the sun would burst through the ceiling, and strike me dead, and so put an end to it!" and she threw her hair from her face, and looked up wildly. "Do you know, Flick, I think something is going to happen to me! My head is whirling about strangely. I've an old father and mother at home, and I've been thinking of them at odd times, all the day. Father is an old man—a basket-maker—and I can see him as plainly as I see you, sitting down in our little room, weaving the canes, and thinking of me. Yes, I can *see* him thinking of me. He used to stroke my hair and my face, and call me his pretty Milly. Pretty Milly! That's what they called me at home.

I *was* pretty—I had the prettiest hands!”—she put them close to her eyes, with a caressing motion, and hid her face in them. “I can see father with my eyes shut. He weaves the canes in the back room, sitting by the window. There is the little garden outside, and the two pots of mignonette on the window-sill. And there’s the speckled hen that used to eat out of my hand. There is the picture of me on the wall, over the mantel-shelf, with my hair all in curls. Father is smiling at it. And now—now it is raining, and what do you think he is doing? He is looking at me, and crying, and I am lying dead in a basket cradle, with flowers all about me!” (She stood silent for a little while, with her face still buried in her hands, as if she could see the picture she had described.) “He was too fond of me, father was; he was so fond of me that he didn’t look after me properly; he used to let me do as I liked.”

“Why don’t you go home to him?” asked Old Flick, in a voice which he strove to make gentle.

“Home!” she exclaimed. “Home! As I am! What would they say of me, I wonder? No; thank God, they think me dead. But there! I don’t want to think of them, and they still keep coming up;” and she passed her hands over her face, confusedly.

"What's the matter, Milly?" Old Flick said, soothingly. "What's made you like this?"

"Drink!" she cried. "Drink and thought. And the more I think, the more my head is filled with awful fancies. Why did Jim go away from me? What right had he to leave me alone by myself?" and here she began to cry. But, seeing that Flick was about to speak, she said, "Stop a minute. I haven't done yet. I must work myself out first, and then I shall be all right. How long is it since you were a boy, Flick?"

"I don't remember," he muttered.

"What happiness! Not to be able to remember! But if you could remember, you would have to go a long way back, Flick; you're old enough to be my grandfather. It isn't so long ago since I was a little girl, and I can't help remembering. Oh, if I could forget! if I could forget!" And throwing herself upon the ground, she sighed, and trembled, and sobbed; and then, as if angry with herself, she bit her white lips, and tried to suppress her passion.

"Now, then, you are more quiet," said Old Flick, after a little while. "Get up, Milly, like a good girl, and go home."

"I'm not a good girl—I'm a bad woman; and," she said, folding her arms resolutely, "I'm not going

to stir until you give me what I want, and tell me what I want to know."

"I haven't any money, Milly," whined Old Flick, "and I can't tell you anything you don't know."

"Didn't Jim say, before he left, that you were to give me money when I wanted it?"

"Yes, but he hasn't sent me any, and I have no more to give. I'm a poor man, Milly."

"What was in that letter Jim sent you?"

"That letter?" exclaimed Old Flick, almost instinctively putting his hand to the pocket in which it was hidden.

"Yes, that letter," repeated Milly, her quick eyes noting the old man's action.

"There was nothing in it, Milly, upon my—my honour, and I burnt it."

"All right," Milly said, quietly, rising. "I suppose there was nothing in it, as you say, for you never tell a lie; and I suppose you burnt it, for you never tell a lie; and I suppose you haven't got any money, for you never tell a lie. That's right, ain't it?"

"Yes, that's right," he exclaimed, sullenly.

"And can you tell me," said Milly, "what's to become of Jim's baby—for it is Jim's, you know. How am I to keep it?"

"How do I know what's to become of it?" asked Old Flick, in return.

"I'll kill it," Milly said, composedly.

"Milly!" cried Old Flick, catching her arm.

"Let me go! You don't think I meant it, do you? I haven't come to that yet. No, I won't kill it. I'll do something better;" and without another word, Milly walked away.

"A good job she's gone," muttered Old Flick. "I must tell Jim about her. She's getting mischievous. If she had known I had that letter about me, she would have torn it from me, I believe. The cat! Does she know there is anything in the letter about her? No, she can't; she only suspects. I must read it once more, and destroy it. It implicates the whole gang; I must burn it—burn it. What a turn she gave me when she talked about killing the baby! I am glad she's gone;" and, in self-gratulation, Old Flick drank some more rum-and-water, and, raising his eyes, exclaimed—"The devil take the cat! Here she is again!"

And there she was again, sure enough, with her baby in her arms.

"Now then, Old Flick," she said, "I've got rid of all my fancies. When Jim went away, he told

me you would give me money as I wanted it, so long as I didn't ask for too much. I haven't asked for too much, have I? You precious old flint, you've taken good care of that. You've screwed me down so tight that I've been obliged to pawn every blessed thing I could lay hands on ; and I haven't a shilling left, and haven't anything more to pawn."

"You've plenty of money to get drunk with, anyhow," said Old Flick, with a growl.

"The drink was treated to me. People will give me lush, but they won't give me bread. Can you tell me how I am to keep Jim's baby?"

"How do I know? I suppose you can get your own living."

She gave him another of her threatening looks, and then she asked—

"Are you going to give me some money?"

"I haven't any."

"Very well. I love my baby; let alone that it's mine, it is a pretty little thing. Of course you can't understand how it is a bad girl like me can love an innocent pet like this; but then you never loved anything in your life, and can't be supposed to understand my feeling. I love it dearly, but as I can't keep Jim's baby, and as you are in partner-

ship with Jim, you'd better keep it yourself;" and she laid the baby on the table, where it sprawled contentedly amongst the bottles and glasses.

"What do you mean?" demanded Old Flick, in considerable alarm.

"What do I mean? Just this—I'm going to leave the baby here. You'll have to feed it and wash it. It will be a nice companion for you, and you can bring it up your own way. What a blessed father you'll make!"

"Are you mad!" cried Old Flick, with a rueful look at the baby.

"Not a bit of it. I've often thought what a pity it is you haven't got a lot of young Flicks of your own. Never mind. Here's one you can try your hand upon."

"Take the brat away!" exclaimed Old Flick.

"Will you give me some money?"

"No!" he snarled.

"Then here's your baby!" Milly said; and taking the child from the table, she placed it dexterously in Old Flick's arms, and moved towards the door.

"Come back, you jade!" roared Old Flick, looking disgustedly at his burden. "Come back, and I'll give you what you want."

"How much now?" asked Milly, with a laugh, standing by the half-open door.

Old Flick fumbled in his pockets, and, with much difficulty, produced three half-crowns.

"Seven-and-six," he said.

"Baby will cost you more than that the first week," said Milly. "Then, how am I to live? 'Tain't half enough."

"I haven't another shilling in the world!" cried Old Flick, tearing at his gray locks in a delirium of drunken despair. "You'll ruin me, you jade!"

"Say two pounds," suggested Milly, regardless of his appeal; "and out with it quick, or I'm off. Now, then, before I count three. One——"

"Milly, dear, say a pound," implored Old Flick.

"Two——"

"Thirty bob!" screamed Old Flick, in anguish.

"Three. I'm off."

"Stop, stop!" roared Old Flick; "here's the money, and I wish you'd kill yourself with it."

"And what did Jim say about me in the letter?" asked Milly, coming back.

"Not a word," said Flick, pretending to consider, as he counted out a pound's worth of silver. "Oh, yes, he did; he sent his love to you. You'll find that right, Milly."

"All right," said Milly, pocketing the money carelessly. "You know, Flick, if you'd like to keep the baby——"

"Take it away—take it away!" cried Old Flick; "and curse you, the pair of you," he added, in an undertone.

"You fool!" exclaimed Milly, scornfully, as she took the baby in her arms, and kissed her. "You gray-headed, cold-hearted, old fool! Did you think for a moment that I would leave this angel from heaven here, for you to contaminate with your filthy breath! Did you think it, old sinner? You might have saved your money, if you weren't a coward as well as a thief. And so you have burnt the letter, eh, Flick!"

"Yes, yes," said Old Flick, as Milly walked away with the child, "it is burnt, sure enough. Phew! what with her, and what with the heat, I'm melting away. How cantankerous she was about the letter! She'd have gone mad if she'd seen it. I *must* burn it; it isn't safe to keep; but I must copy the address first."

His shaking hand sought his pocket, and drew therefrom the letter. He opened it, and read it again by fits and starts, muttering the while. But when he tried to copy the address, his

fingers trembled so that he could not trace the letters.

"I'll wait till the evening, when it's cool," he said, returning the letter to his pocket, "when it's cool. The devil take the sun! It's enough to scorch one to a cinder!"

As a counteractive, Old Flick applied himself industriously to his rum-and-water, which he swallowed with a running accompaniment of oaths and curses. Now, as too much rum-and-water will make a man drunk, and as Old Flick had drunk a great deal too much rum-and-water, and still continued drinking it, he soon got very drunk indeed—so drunk, that he began to cry, and to beat his breast, and to tear his hair, and to shake so, that the table trembled when he leant upon it.

"To scorch one to a cinder," he mumbled, pursuing his previous remark. "Supposing it should come, and scorch me to a cinder!"

He held up his hands, as if to ward off a blow, and as he looked about him, his fevered fancy conjured a thousand crawling things upon the ceiling and the walls. With sight terror-fixed he gazed at them as they crept nearer and nearer to him. As fast as he brushed them away, they came

again. In desperation he drank more rum, and strove to rid himself of the terrible fancies.

“Go away—go away,” he cried, menacing them with impotent fingers; “I know what it is. I’ve been drinking too much. I must leave it off, or I shall have the deliriums.” To strengthen his good resolution he applied himself again to the bottle. “I’m better now. What a cat that Milly is! Beast—beast—beast! Why don’t she die? What good is she in the world? She wished to frighten me by asking me if I had ever tried to take poison. What did she mean by ‘the devils in the glass?’ Ugh! I can see them glaring at me!”—and Old Flick staggered to his feet in dire terror, and then dropped down in a drunken swoon.

It was late in the afternoon now, and people began to breathe more freely. A slight but refreshing breeze set in from the sea, and the cooler air, floating through the streets, brought a sweet relief to exhausted nature. To no person did the grateful change bring more satisfaction than to Grif, whose sufferings during the day had caused him to fret exceedingly. The whole of that day, as he stood blistering in the sun, he had been propounding questions to himself—questions to which he

could find only one answer, dictated by hunger and misery. Why was he so unfortunate? All other boys were not so. He was trying hard to be good, and something would not let him. He felt that his requirements were modest, that he did not ask for too much. The constant pressure of misery had caused him to look about him and compare his condition with that of other boys. There were plenty of them walking the streets—well-fed, well-dressed boys; not sons of gentlemen, but working boys—boys occupying the social sphere to which he aspired. What had he done that his lot should not be as comfortable as theirs appeared to be? He was sure he was trying hard enough to deserve it. "I've been bad, I know," he reflected, "but I can't make out as it was all my fault. I couldn't help it. There's father, he was bad, and in course I was bad too; I didn't know nothin' else. Then Ally come, and she made me good—leastways, she tried to. But what's the good of bein' good? I usen't to be 'arf so hungry when I was bad!" This was the argument which clenched the matter. When he was bad, his stomach was better supplied, as a rule, than now that he was good.

Not only was Grif's mind argumentative, but his nature was sensitive. How this came about was

strange, for his father's nature was brutal enough ; he did not remember his mother, and had never given her a thought. His sensitiveness was a positive misfortune ; it intensified his sufferings just now. What with the awful heat, which made his heart faint and sick, the hunger which gnawed at his vitals, and the sorrow he felt at being parted for ever from Little Peter, his condition was an utterly miserable one. He could not battle against such influences ; they were too powerful for him. He felt an irresistible conviction that he should never see Little Peter again. "I wonder if he ever thinks of me ?" Grif mused ; and in his then despondent mood he groaned at the thought that all remembrance of him was wiped out of Little Peter's mind. "No matter, it was all for his good. He's a precious sight better off where he is, I'll be bound. I suppose he's got good clothes and good boots, and plenty of grub. That's jolly for him, poor Little Peter ! If he was here to-day, it 'd pretty well settle him, I think." There was some small consolation in this reflection, and Grif tried to make the most of it.

From this it will be perceived how unfortunate Grif had been in his new vocation. Honesty and morality had not taken to him kindly. As a moral

shoeblack, his career had been the very reverse of prosperous, notwithstanding that he had striven to deserve better. He had attended some meetings of the Moral Bootblackening Boys' Reformatory, and had heard a great deal about morality; and, albeit he would have been considerably perplexed if he had been asked to define the meaning of the word, it could not but be presumed that he had been much edified by the moral essays and exhortations to which he had listened. And yet his mental condition, when he came away from those meetings, was one of perplexity. He could not see the connection between morality and a bellyful of food. "It's all very well," he would mutter, "for them coves who's got lots to eat and drink to talk about morality; but what good does it do me?" Exhortations, moral lessons, pious sermons, would often be given by well-meaning men at the meetings of the Moral Bootblackening Boys' Reformatory. At one of these meetings, the speaker had fixed Grif with his eye during the whole of his discourse, which occupied nearly an hour. The burden of his exhortation was an oppressive beseeching to Grif to "look up." By day and by night, awake or asleep, standing still or walking, always through his life, Grif was entreated to "look up." Never mind how

persistent misfortune might be in persecuting him, never mind what calamities might overtake him, everything would come right if he would continue to "look up." "But how *can* I do that," Grif asked of himself, "when I'm forced to be always lookin' down?" whereby he meant, literally, looking down at the boots of the passers-by to see if they wanted polishing. Which coarse perversion of the pious speaker's exhortation was another proof of the baseness of Grif's nature.

Many such sermons did Grif hear; they sounded well, all of them. But they shrunk into very nothingness when he applied them to his own case. To him they *were* nothing; they did him no good. Grif wanted practical arguments. Theory was valueless to him. As for good advice he had enough of that, goodness knows. He received it by the bushel; it was literally heaped upon him. But he did not get an ounce of meat out of it for all its virtue. He was an especial object of attention to Mr. Zachariah Blemish. That great man and princely merchant had at various times condescended to be gracious to Grif by word of mouth. Mr. Blemish would inquire of Grif how he was getting along, and Grif did not have courage to answer that he was getting along badly, or rather

that he was not getting along at all. It would have sounded like an impeachment of the conduct of the great man in providing him with the implements of his occupation. "That is right—that is right," Mr. Blemish would remark. "You are moral, are you not?" "Very moral, sir," Grif would answer, humbly. "Very good; mind you keep moral," Mr. Blemish would exhort. And Grif invariably ducked his head and promised that he would keep very moral. But when the great merchant was gone, Grif would shrug his shoulders, and ponder and puzzle over the good advice given him without arriving at any satisfactory conclusion.

Occasionally he visited Alice and argued matters with her. Alice truly was his good angel. Many and many a time had they two sat together, he listening to her gentle voice, she striving to impress upon him truths which would have seemed to him the bitterest of lies if he had judged them by the light of his hard experience. But Grif did not interpret her words by that light. If he did not understand, he believed; and his nature did not rebel against her sweet words, or the voice as soft as the voice against the sermons pronounced at the reformatory. What Alice said was true, and he was satisfied.

her, to sit near her, to look up into her face now and then; it was more than happiness, it was heaven. With such an influence upon him, Grif could not be otherwise than good. She kept him from crime. Bad promptings had no chance with him when he thought of her. Ill as she could afford it, poor girl, she fed him often, although every day her means grew less and less, and although Hunger, with its white eyes and despairing face, crept nearer and nearer at every turn of the hour-glass. All she could do was to wait for it, and shudder at its near approach. The first few weeks after her husband left her, she had heard regularly from him, and had received long letters filled with love, and tenderness, and hope. And she would read them again and again, and cry for joy over them, and press them to her lips, to her heart, and place them under her pillow at night. Many a happy dream did they bring her, and she would rise in the morning with a light heart, hopeful and smiling. But lately his letters had become shorter and shorter, and the intervals between them longer. And now three weeks had passed, and she had received no letter. Three or four times every day she went to the post-office, until her face became so familiar to the clerk that, directly


he saw it looking almost beseechingly through the little window, he would shake his head without waiting for her to speak. How hurriedly she would throw on her bonnet and shawl, and hasten to the little window, and how sadly and slowly she would walk back to her poor lodgings, heartsore and disappointed! That little window! It might have been likened unto heaven's gate, or the gate of despair. Sometimes, when she reached it, panting, she lingered before she asked, as if fearful to have her hope destroyed. That would be mostly when there were no other applicants; but when there was a crowd round it, drawn thither by the arrival of an important mail, she would take her stand among them, and burn with impatience until her turn came. Then she would think it cruel that others had letters and she had none. Many of them had three, four, a dozen, and she not one! The pleased expressions upon the faces of women who opened their letters and read as they walked, made her feel as she ought not to have felt; and to drive away envious thoughts she would lower her veil, and soon could see nothing through her blinding tears. The last letter she had received from Richard was written in a very despondent mood, and that made her more anxious to hear from him.

There are some men who cannot fight with the world—who cannot battle with misfortune. The first blow floors them, and they lie helpless, and make no effort to rise. There are others who, at every knock-down blow, jump up again, hurt but not killed, and who, to speak metaphorically, square up at misfortune with courage and vigour. Richard Handfield was one of the former, and because he did not find a rich patch of gold at the bottom of the first hole he sunk, he whimpered at Fate, and did not care to try again. All that Alice could glean from his last letter was, that misfortune pursued him and mocked at his efforts. That was the way he expressed it; he chose to believe that the world had a special spite against him, and that he, of all the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who are fighting life's battles, was singled out for the victim. The fault, which was in himself, he lay upon fate; he was partial to the common platitude, "fate was against him." He was naturally indolent, and if he had known how to work he would scarcely have cared to do so. There are thousands of men of this type in the world.

Alice often fed Grif. But Grif was shrewd enough to perceive that Alice was daily more unable to spare him the food she pressed upon

and forced him to eat. One evening, when he was in the midst of eating a thick slice of bread and butter which Alice had given him, he stopped suddenly, and, looking at her, was overcome with remorse at the thought that he was eating her meal. He could not eat any more; he placed the bread upon the table, and said, with his eyes filled with tears, that he was satisfied. From that day, he never tasted food in her room. Often when he was hungry, often, when he had stood about all the day patiently, without earning sixpence, he refrained from going to her, and crept, supperless, to sleep. At other times he waited until he knew Alice had finished her poor meal, and then, in answer to her inquiry as to whether he had had his tea, would say that he had had a jolly good tuck-out, and would make his mouth water by particularising what he had eaten.

On this afternoon Grif was particularly miserable. He had suffered much during the day from heat; and although he had plenty of cold water to drink, it must be admitted that that was but poor satisfaction to a hungry boy. He would have gone to his pie-shop, but the old woman had been gathered to her foremothers, and the pie-shop had passed into other hands. Grif had stood behind his boot-stand



all the day, broiling in the sun. No passer-by had been mad enough to stay blistering for a quarter of an hour in the heat, while his boots were being blackened. And, when evening came, it found Grif faint, and weary, and unhappy. The tears actually welled into his eyes as the sense of his forlorn condition came upon him. He could *not* stand it any longer! He looked round, with such a sense of desolation expressed in his face, that if any humane person had noticed it, it must have touched his heart with pity. He thought of the exhortations he had listened to, and of the good advice which had been heaped upon him. He thought of the promise he had given Mr. Blemish that he would continue to be moral. To break that promise would not pain Grif much; but there was the pledge he had given to Alice; he was about to be false to her. But he could not starve; she wouldn't ask him to do that, he knew. "No, she wouldn't arks me to do that," he muttered. "I'd die for her—yes, this minute. If I went to her now, she would give me somethin' to eat—in course she would! But I *won't* go to her; I'll starve first! She stinted herself the other night, and didn't have enough to eat because I was there. I know what I'll do. I'll go to Old Flick's, and sell my stand

and brushes. He'll give me a bob for 'em, I dessay. Ally won't like it when she hears it, but I can't help it; I'm hungry."

Then the thought came upon him that, although he might have some right not to be moral if he pleased, he had no right to sell the stand and brushes. They were the property of the Reformatory. But he was stung to desperation, and he drove the thought from his mind.

"I don't care," he said, recklessly. "I've been moral long enough. It ain't a bit of good! I ain't agoin' to starve any more. If they find it out, they can put me in quod agin, that's all. They'll give me my grub and a blanket there, at all events, and that's what I can't get here. I s'pose I *am* a bad lot, and I shall never be no good. How can I be good when I haven't got nothin' to eat?"

Asking this question of himself with much sternness, Grif put his stand and brushes under his arm, and wended his way towards Old Flick's Thoroughfare.

CHAPTER II.

POOR MILLY.

WHEN Milly walked out of Old Flick's store, she walked out with the full determination of returning and possessing herself of the letter he had received from Jim Pizey, and which she was certain the old man had not destroyed. She had two reasons for her determination. One was a woman's reason—she had made up her mind to have it, and have it she would. A woman's logic is not always logical. The other reason was, that she was convinced there was something in the letter concerning herself. She did not stop to consider whether it would be good for her to read it; it was a letter from Jim; and read it she would. She felt hurt that he had sent her no word since his departure. There was nothing strange in her affection for him. She had no one else to love except her baby, and he was its father. He had deserted her, and still she clung to him. There is no human being in the world who

is so complete an isolation as not to have a love for something; and the unfortunate class to which Milly belonged is no exception to this rule, for it is capable of strong, if misguided, affection.

To fortify herself for her task, Milly, after she had lulled her baby to sleep, adjourned to the bar of a public house, where she told how she had "done" Old Flick, and where she spent the greater portion of the two pounds in treating her associates to drink. Having soon made herself most thoroughly and desperately drunk, she set off staggering, but very earnest, towards Old Flick's All-sorts Store. Her mind was in a dangerous state of tension. She was almost blind from the fumes of the spirits she had taken, and everything swam before her; but she swung onwards, troling out snatches of songs, and laughing and talking to herself incoherently. She did not attract much attention. A woman drunk was no novelty in that neighbourhood—indeed, her state was chronic to the locality; and she was allowed to proceed unmolested—some few people turning to look after her, but most avoiding her. She had not far to go, and when she arrived at her destination, she staggered in at the door, and sinking into a seat, gazed confusedly

about her. Brushing her hair from her face, she looked round in vain for Old Flick.

"Now then, Flick," she said, almost inarticulately, "it's no use hiding away. Lord! how my head swims! Come out and give me the letter!"

She waited for an answer, but received none, for Old Flick was deep in his drunken swoon upon the floor.

"Are you coming out, old sinner?" she asked, looking vaguely about her. "I will have the letter—I will! I will! I will! You haven't burnt it. You're not half cunning enough; I saw your hand go to your pocket when you told me you'd burnt it. I'll tear your hair out of your head if you don't give it to me!"

She felt dizzy and confused, and seeing a bucket filled with water in the corner, she staggered instinctively towards it, and, tumbling down by its side, plunged her face into it. It was deliciously cool; she kept her face in it, until she almost lost her breath, and then raising the bucket, she poured the water over her head. It refreshed, if it did not sober her. A moment afterwards, as she seized her hair to wring the water from it, she shivered, and turned cold as ice; and then flushed into a burning heat. Wiping her face with her dress, Milly, for

the first time, observed Old Flick lying upon the floor. Her eagerness to obtain possession of the letter appeared to desert her for a time. But presently she crept towards the prostrate man, and feeling in his pockets, found the letter. The old man murmured some almost incoherent words, among which she heard her own name. She laughed as she heard it, and said, "Oh, you old fox! Milly's done you, this time. Here's Jim's letter. What does he say in it?" She wiped her face again with her wet dress, and commenced to read the letter slowly. She read to herself until she came to the last page, when she cried, "What's this? 'After what you have told me about Milly, I never want to look at her face again. I didn't think she would turn informer against Jim Pizey. If ever I come across her, I'll mark her, by G—!'" She read these lines twice over, and then, letting her hands fall idly in her lap, looked before her, bewildered. "He never thought I would turn informer against him!" she exclaimed, a cold shuddering taking possession of her. "Oh, Lord! What's this feeling coming over me? Somebody's been telling lies to him about me. Who is it? Me split upon Jim! Who said so?" She quite forgot the letter which she held tightly clutched in her

hand. She threw the damp hair back from her forehead, and looked shudderingly round the room. Her skin was blazing, and there was an awful brilliancy in her eyes. She was burning hot, and she placed her hand upon her throbbing forehead, trying to press out the pain; in a little while her condition changed, and she sat still, shivering, and burst into a strange, wild laugh.

"What's the matter with me?" she murmured. "I never felt like this before. Get up, Old Flick!" she said, softly, to herself, and with no idea of addressing the old man. "Get up, Old Flick!"

She repeated the words almost in a whisper, twenty times at least, in a wondering kind of voice. Then she sang them over and over again, in a vacant manner.

"Oh, my head! my head!" she moaned, and then she commenced again singing softly to herself, her voice breaking occasionally into a kind of wail. She continued in this state for some time, and made no sign of recognition of Old Flick when, after a series of growls, he sat up on the floor. He gazed at her with stupified amazement, and he growled as he looked down at the pool of water in which he had been lying. As he raised his eyes, she caught

his look, and introduced his name into the meaningless words she was singing.

"Milly!" he cried, half frightened; but she showed no consciousness of him. "She's going mad, I believe," he muttered. "Get up, Milly, there's a dear, and go home."

But she was deaf to all his entreaties, and presently she began to scream.

"There, Old Flick!" she cried. "Do you see the spiders creeping up the wall? There they go, creeping, creeping, creeping, and now they're on the ceiling, looking down upon us. Keep away—keep away!" she screamed, clutching at the old man, who, almost scared out of his senses, followed her gaze with fear. "They'll drop down upon us! That's right, Jim. Crush 'em—smash 'em! Ugh! You can't kill 'em half quick enough. Do you see that big one leering down? That's Old Flick. Smash him, Jim. Ugh! keep off! They're dropping from the ceiling upon me!" and she writhed upon the floor, and plucked at her dress with her hands, and shuddered and moaned distressfully.

At this moment, Grif, with his boot-stand on his shoulder, and his brushes under his arm, entered the store. Receiving no answer to his taps upon

the counter, he peeped into the back room, and saw Milly tearing madly at her dress, and Old Flick looking on helplessly, in an agony of terror.

“What’s up?” inquired Grif.

Old Flick rose instantly, and he clung to Grif as though the lad were an anchor of hope.

“Don’t grip so hard, Flick,” cried Grif, who, being faint with hunger, scarcely had strength to shake the old man off.

“Milly’s mad, I think,” said Old Flick. “Take her home, Grif—take her home.”

“How am I to take her home?” asked Grif, looking at Milly. She had covered her face with her hands, and was in a terrible fit of trembling. He went to her, and tried to remove her hands from her face, but he could not succeed. Then, glancing about him, he caught sight of a loaf of bread in the cupboard, the door of which was half open. There it was, the bread for which he was craving. His heart beat painfully as he saw it. Not even pity for the girl could overcome his natural sensations of hunger. The gnawing within was more powerful than pity. “What’ll you give me if I take her away?” he inquired, eyeing the loaf yearningly.

“Anything — anything — that is, anything in

reason," quavered Old Flick, qualifying his answer. "And if she ever darkens my door again," he muttered, "I'll have her dragged to the lock-up, as sure as my name's Flick."

Man is a bargaining animal. Despite his hunger, Grif pretended to consider for a few moments. He knew that if he exhibited too much eagerness, he would have less chance of obtaining the food.

"I'll take her away," he said, slowly, "if you'll give me that loaf of bread"—and he moved wistfully towards the cupboard,—"and this tin of sardines——"

"Yes—yes," assented Old Flick, eagerly, taking the food from the cupboard.

"And five bob for this stand and set of brushes," concluded Grif, boldly.

"They're not yours," said the old man, all his cunning intellect on the alert directly the question of barter arose.

"Never you mind that," said Grif; "it's not the first time you bought what didn't belong to parties you bought 'em of. I won't take her away for less. I'm hungry now, and I shall be hungry to-morrow. I must have some tin."

"Take two and six, then, Grif," said Flick. "I'll give you two and six."

Grif shook his head.

"Say four bob," he said, "and it's a bargain."

Old Flick hastily produced four shillings, and gave them to Grif, who deposited on the table his vouchers to respectability, feeling, as he did so, that he had lost his character as a moral shoe-black, and was once more a vagrant and a thief. The next thing Grif did was to tear a piece out of the loaf and wolfishly devour it. Theoretical philanthropists might have learned a useful lesson if they had witnessed the ravenous eagerness with which Grif swallowed the stale dry bread. Old Flick was neither a theoretical nor a practical philanthropist, and he viewed the proceeding with a feeling of impatience, urging Grif to take Milly away quickly. It was not a difficult task—indeed, it was so easily accomplished, that Flick was filled with considerable remorse at the price he had paid for it. Milly's fit was over for a while, and she rose almost passively as Grif took her hand. She looked at Old Flick without recognising him; but she instinctively shrank from him.

"You've been frightenin' of her," Grif said to the old man. "I've a good mind to pitch into you."

Grif was stronger now, and having relapsed into vagrancy, felt himself at liberty to indulge his organ

of combativeness. But Old Flick, in a quavering voice, protested that he had not been saying anything to Milly to frighten her.

"She looks as if she had been scared out of her life," Grif remarked.

"She's been drinking herself mad, Grif," Old Flick said, "that's what she's been doing. She'll be all right when she's had a good sleep."

Grif nodded his head, and led Milly away. She trembled violently as they walked to her poor lodgings; and when she got to her room, she threw herself upon the bed, and moaned and cried deliriously. She had placed the letter she stole from Old Flick in the bosom of her dress, and she kept her hand over it as if to guard it.

"She's orfle bad," mused Grif, seating himself on a stool at the foot of the bed, and employing himself with the bread and sardines. "I wonder if she knows me. Milly!"

The girl made no reply, and tossed about on the bed, sobbing piteously. Grif tried the experiment of placing her baby near her; but although he put the child into her arms, she did not notice it. She was so restless that he took the baby on his lap, and offered her a crust of bread, which, much to Grif's astonishment, she grasped with her little fists

and sucked at vigorously, staring contentedly at Grif the while. But Milly's distress drew his attention from the study of baby.

"Milly!" he cried again, shaking her, and attempting to raise her. "Send I may live! if she ain't like a ball of fire! And she's all wet, too. What did you say, Milly? Say that agin."

"And they've got hold of Dick Handfield," she murmured. "Oh! what a wicked plot! If Grif knew—but I won't tell, no; though you do suspect me."

"If I knew!" exclaimed Grif. "If I knew what? She said, somethin' about Dick Handfield! What does it all mean?"

He listened eagerly for her next words, which might give him a clue to her meaning, but Milly's fancies had changed.

"Go home!" she said. "Why don't I go home, he asked? What would they think of me? Don't come near me, father! Keep away; I'm not your Milly—she's dead long ago—dead! dead! dead! Do you see that sheet of water?" and she half rose from the bed, and clutched Grif by the shoulder. "Father's standing on the other side. What an awful way off he is! He looks like a ghost. Does the water stretch into the next world, I wonder! There it is—miles, and miles, and miles of it.

And look! just over the hill, where it flows out of the world, there's father and mother, and they're looking at me, and crying, and I am sinking down, down! I'm choking—take me out! take me out! Now I'm in my coffin. They're nailing the cover on me! Don't shut out the light; everything is black: now it's red. And now—now the worms are crawling in. Keep them away! Ugh! I can't breathe!" and she struggled madly with Grif, who was holding her down. It was as much as his strength could accomplish, and presently she grew calmer.

"I can't leave her like this," said Grif. "She's very ill, and she'll do herself a mischief, if she ain't took care on. She's quiet now. I'll run and fetch a doctor."

Acting on the impulse, Grif, first taking the baby from the bed, and placing it upon the floor in a corner of the room, ran quickly to an apothecary's shop hard-by. It happened fortunately that a doctor was in the shop at the time, giving some directions for a prescription. He listened to Grif's story, and, without a moment's hesitation, accompanied Grif to Milly's lodgings. He looked very grave as he placed his hands upon Milly's burning forehead, and felt her pulse.

"How long has she been in this condition?" he asked.

Grif told him.

"Is she married? Umph! What a question! Of course she's not. Poor creature! So young, too, and pretty. Sad case! Sad case!"

He took his pocket book from his pocket and made a memorandum, and then observed, "If the poor girl has any friends, they should be here. She wants care and nursing, although even they will not save her, I fear. A female friend should be with her all the night. Come with me, boy, and I will give you medicine."

In silence, Grif followed the doctor to the apothecary's shop, and in silence he received the medicine which the doctor himself made up.

"You can read?" said the doctor.

"I knows some of the letters," replied Grif, "when they're stuck upon the wall very large."

"Ah!" mused the doctor, looking attentively at Grif. "Give her a wineglassful of this medicine every hour; but don't wake her to give it, if she is sleeping quietly. I will call again in the morning to see how she is getting on."

"Is she very bad?" inquired Grif.

"Very," laconically replied the doctor.

"Will she die?"

The doctor placed his hands upon Grif's shoulders, and noticed the boy's eyes luminous with tears. "Would you be sorry?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; very sorry."

"What are you—brother, cousin, any relation?" was the next question, carelessly asked.

"No, sir, not as I knows on; but she's been very kind to me."

"Don't stand chattering here," the doctor exclaimed, abruptly; "go and give the girl her medicine."

Grif was on the point of quitting the shop, when the thought occurred to him that the doctor ought to be paid. Taking from his pocket the four shillings for which he had sold his boot-stand and brushes, he placed them on the counter, immediately beneath the doctor's nose.

"What is this for, my lad?" asked the doctor.

Struck with a sense of the insufficiency of the remuneration, Grif said, apologetically, "I ain't got another mag about me, sir. I'll bring you some more when I gets it."

"Confound you, you young scamp!" exclaimed the doctor, in a fiery manner. "Do you think I have no humanity? Take your four shillings away,

and here are ten more to add to them. Run off, and give the girl her medicine, and mind she has some one with her during the night;" and he pushed the boy hastily out of the shop.

When Grif returned to Milly, he found her still lying on the bed. He spoke to her, but she did not reply to him. He was the more alarmed at this because Milly was not asleep; her eyes were staring round the room, and her cheeks were burning with an unnatural fire. He moistened her parched lips with water, and tried to make her take the medicine, but she pushed him away, fretfully, and turned from him.

"What's to be done?" asked Grif of himself, in serious perplexity. "The doctor chap says she ought to have some one with her. He's a good sort, he is! I can't get her to take her physic." Then, struck with a sudden idea, he said, "I'll go and arks Ally."

Without another thought he hurried to Alice's lodgings. There was no need to entreat her help. Her bonnet and shawl were on before he had concluded his story.

"But she ain't a good girl, Ally," said Grif; "mind that!"

"God help her!" said Alice. "She is in the

more need of assistance. And the poor baby, too! Come, Grif."

And very soon our Alice was in the sick girl's room, attending on her, and nursing her with a good woman's loving zeal. No thought of the difference in their social positions interfered with the performance of what Alice deemed to be a duty. She undressed Milly, and placed her in the bed; and, raising the poor girl's head on her bosom, she gave her the medicine, which Milly swallowed without resistance. Then Alice tidied up the room, and hushed the baby to sleep by the mother's side. She almost forgot her own grief in the sad spectacle before her, and the tears came to her eyes out of very pity, as she sat beside the sick girl's bed.

"Will you stop here all night, Ally?" asked Grif, who had retired from the room, and who now entered at a signal from Alice.

"Yes, until the doctor comes in the morning."

"She's a angel, that's what she is," soliloquised Grif, retreating to a corner, and squatting himself upon the floor, "and I'm her friend. She said so herself. I wonder if there ever *was* anybody 'arf so good as her!"

When Alice was undressing Milly, she observed the letter which lay concealed in the bosom of

Milly's dress ; but, unconscious of all else, the sick girl clutched the paper tightly in her hand, and, seeing her desire to retain it, Alice made no effort to take it from her. Many hours passed, and still Alice sat patiently by Milly's side. During this time Milly was delirious, and raved and spoke words which caused Alice to shudder. But pity for the poor girl's condition overcame every repugnant feeling, and she nursed Milly tenderly and gently, as if she were, indeed, a good and virtuous, instead of an erring, sister. Shortly after midnight, the moon being nearly at its full, Milly turned her eyes to Alice's face, and asked in a weak wondering voice,—

“ Who are you ? ”

“ I am your friend, Milly,” replied Alice. “ Do you feel better ? ”

“ Yes, I feel better.” The words came from her lips slowly, and with an effort. “ Give me your hand.”

Alice placed her hand in Milly's, and the sick girl raised it to her lips, and to her forehead.

“ Who sent you here ? ”

“ No one. Grif told me you were ill, and I came to nurse you.”

“ I never saw you before. Good God ! ” Milly

exclaimed, feeling Alice's wedding ring. "You are married!"

"Yes."

"And you come to nurse me! Do you know what I am?" and she raised herself in the bed, and her eyes appeared to dilate with horror as she looked round the walls of the room.

"Hush, my dear! Lie down."

"What is this?" Milly cried, seizing Alice by the arm, and trembling violently. "Everything is fading from my sight. Don't let me go! Hold me—hold me! My heart is fainting—dying!" And a wild shriek issuing from her lips, as she fell back powerless on the bed, roused Grif from his slumber, and caused him to start to his feet.

A great change had come over Milly. Her face had grown pinched and white, her hands were clammy, and a wild despairing look in her eyes made them awful to look upon. Alice needed all her courage to keep herself from swooning.

"Has she any friends, Grif?" she asked.

"None as I knows on," replied Grif. "Do you know who she is?"

He was about to answer his own question, and tell Alice of Jim Pizer, but just then Milly murmured the man's name.

"Why did you go away, Jim Pizey," she said, "and leave me to starve and drink myself to death? And then to write, you never want to see my face again. It is cruel—it is cruel! Look at me—I am dying, and you have killed me. I don't want to die! Lord help me, I'm not fit to die!"

"Grif," whispered Alice, "was not Jim Pizey the man who tempted my husband to crime?"

"Yes," answered Grif, "and before I came for you she was speaking of him."

"Of my husband, Richard?"

"Yes, but I couldn't make out what she meant."

Milly's wandering speech prevented the continuance of the subject.

"There's mother and father again," she said; "they're always haunting me. I am glad they have come to wish me good-bye, though. I have been a bad daughter to them—a bad daughter—a bad daughter. I'm punished for it now. Forgive me, daddy! I think he does forgive me, his face is so kind; but it was always kind when he looked at me. I can smell the mignonnette on the window-sill. And see! there's my little sister; she died yesterday. How sad she looks in her shroud! She was prettier than me. I slept with her the

night before she died, and she told me to be always good. I say, Jim, don't you think little Cis is prettier than me?—she's better than me! I should like father to make me a basket coffin. Where's baby?"

Alice placed the child in her arms, and as Milly pressed it to her breast, the haggard look in her face quite passed away. She was very young—scarcely nineteen years of age; yet it was better for her to die, young as she was, than live her life of shame.

"Do you know where there's a clergyman, Grif?" asked Alice.

"No; what for?"

"Do you not see that she is dying? I wish there was a clergyman here."

"I don't want a clergyman," gasped Milly. "Yes, my dear, I am quite sensible now. I don't want a clergyman. Your good face is better than all. Will you kiss me?"

Alice bent down and kissed her.

"Don't cry for me. I wonder why you should be here; for you know I am a bad girl, and you are a respectable woman. Give me a little drink—my throat is so dry! Oh, what a wicked life I have led! Will God forgive me, do you think?"

"Yes, dear Milly," said Alice, weeping. "God will forgive you if you ask Him."

"I do ask Him," said Milly, earnestly, but very slowly, for her voice was failing her. "Fold my hands, dear. I do ask Him, humbly. Forgive me, God!"

There was solemn silence in the room. Alice, kneeling by the bed, checked her sobs, and watched every movement in the face of the dying girl. Grif, bare-headed, stood by, in awe; his eyes were not crying, but his heart was. For Grif was very troubled. He had never prayed to God, and here in the quiet night, in the dread presence of death, the thought of his own utter wickedness and unworthiness filled him with gloom. He crept down on his knees, and lifting his hands, as if to a visible Presence, he said—"Forgive me, God!" and then trembled, and cried softly to himself.

"Mine has been a wicked life," said Milly; "but I did not know what I was doing—indeed, indeed I did not! I never stopped to think. You believe me, don't you, dear?"

"I do believe you, my poor, poor Milly!"

"You break my heart, my dear, when you speak like that," said Milly, the tears stealing down her face. Alice stooped and kissed her again.

"Thank you! it is more than I deserve. You are like a good angel standing by my bed. What could I do? I was persuaded to run away from my home by a young man, three years ago. We came out here, and he left me. What could I do? Is all the sin mine? I was led away. It was not all my fault. Oh, my dear! You are a married woman, and respectable; you don't know the sufferings we poor girls endure!"

Ah! poor Alice! she thought of herself and of her own sad lot, and laid her cheek close by the side of Milly's.

"How good you are!" said Milly, as thus they lay. "What is your name, dear?"

"Alice."

A look of horror crept into Milly's eyes, and a change so ghastly came over her countenance, that Alice caught at her as though she would arrest the life she thought was passing away.

"Alice?" whispered Milly, slowly and painfully, for her strength was leaving her. "Alice? Grif's friend?"

"Yes, dear," replied Alice, holding Milly's hand fast.

"And Richard Handfield is your husband?"

"Yes."

"If you knew—bend your head, for my breath is going—if you knew that the man who is the father of my child had striven to do you a great wrong, to blast your life—had schemed to sting your husband to crime—your husband whom you love, do you not——?"

"Whom I love," repeated Alice, softly.

"——For whom, as I have heard Grif say, you would give your life——"

"For whom, if needed, I would give my life."

"——If you knew that Jim Pizey, my baby's father, was his bitterest enemy, you would leave me to die alone—alone!"

"No, Milly, dear, I would not. I know that Jim Pizey tempted my husband; but he escaped, thank God!"

"You think so—come closer—take this letter—and by-and-by, not now"—she could not control her shudders as she said these words, and gave Alice the letter she had stolen from Old Flick—"by-and-by, read it. It is from Jim Pizey—he is a bad, wicked man, but I was living with him. If ever you see him, let him know that I am dead, and that with my last breath I asked you to forgive him."

"I will, Milly."

"Alice—may I call you Alice?—thank you—Alice, my dear, say you forgive me, for any unconscious wrong I may have done you."

"I forgive you, Milly."

"God bless you! Ask him to give baby to some respectable people to keep, and never to come near it—do you hear me?—never to come near it. He is baby's father, but he must never come near it, or she will be bad like me. Promise me this. I have no one else to ask."

"I promise, Milly."

"God be kind to you!" She lay quiet for a little while, and then she whispered, "How dark it is! Is the moon shining, Alice?"

"Yes, Milly; it is at its full."

"Open the window, dear, and let it shine upon me. Thank you. What a dreadful day this has been, and how quiet the night is! I can see the moon—there is a ladder of light to it from my bed. There are figures moving about in the light—I see your shadow in it, Alice, with your dear eyes. Oh, God bless you! my dear, for being by my side. Kiss me again. Good-bye! Place my baby's hand to my lips. God bless you, baby, and make you good! Is that Grif? Good-bye, Grif!"

“Good-bye, Milly,” said Grif, in a choking voice.

“And now, my dear, fold my hands once more. Forgive me, God!”

A rippling smile passed over Milly’s face, and in that smile she died. The light from the silver moon might have kissed away her life, she yielded it up so peacefully.

For half an hour no sound disturbed the silence. Then Alice, after covering the face of the dead girl, opened the letter. She read, and as she read, her eyes dilated with horror, her whole form collapsed, and with a shuddering scream, she sank into Grif’s arms. The next instant she, by a strong effort, recovered herself, and reading a few more lines, she cried, in a voice of such anguish, that Grif’s knees trembled and his face turned ashen white.

“Oh, Grif! Grif! my heart is broken!”

“What is it, Ally? Are you ill?”

“Listen to me, Grif,” said Alice, rapidly, and in a voice of strong emotion. “The crisis of my life has come. You said once that you would help me if you could——”

“And so I will!” cried the boy. “With my life! So help me G—!”

"This is a letter from Jim Pizey, that poor girl's associate. In it he details his devilish schemes. He discloses how he and his vile associates are going to rob Highlay Station ——"

"Go on, Ally, go on," said Grif, eagerly, as Alice paused to recover her breath.

"That is my father's Station, Grif. My father is displeased with me, and that is the reason I am poor. He is rich—he always keeps large sums of money in the house; and these men are going to rob him—perhaps murder him."

"Jim Pizey don't stick at nothin'," put in Grif, rapidly. "I've heerd him talk of Highlay, but I didn't know it was your father's. Let's go and tell the peelers."

"I cannot! I dare not!" cried Alice. "For, oh, Grif! Grif! they have entrapped my husband, who knows where my father keeps his gold. They have entrapped him in the gang, and they, with my husband in their company, are on the road to rob and murder my father. If I tell the police, my husband is lost—lost!"

"What can we do?"

"We must get up there somehow. We must walk, if we cannot ride. We must beg upon the road, Grif. They intend to wait—thank God! we

may be in time. They intend to wait, the letter says, until my father has in his house a very large sum, with which he is about to purchase a new Station. It is the whim of the seller that he should be paid in gold. We may be in time. Oh! thou beneficent Lord!" exclaimed the girl, as, falling upon her knees, she raised her streaming eyes to the bright heavens, which shone upon her through the open window. "Grant my prayer! Save my husband from this dread crime, and then let me die!"

A silence, as of death, was in the chamber. The glory of the moon shone full upon the upturned face of Alice, quivering with a strong agony, and upon the death-couch of poor Milly, whose life of shame was ended.

"You will come with me, Grif?" said Alice, presently.

"I am ready, Ally," Grif replied. He had been quietly packing up the remains of his bread and sardines in a pocket-handkerchief.

She turned to leave the room, but her eyes fell upon Milly's baby, who was lying asleep, with her hand on her dead mother's breast. She wrote hastily upon a piece of paper, "To the kind doctor who gave medicine to the poor girl who is dead:

Take care of the baby, for the love of God!" and pinned it upon the child's frock. Then, with one last look—a look of blended pity and despair—at the form of the dead girl, Alice took Grif's hand, and went out with him into the open.

CHAPTER III.

BAD LUCK.

“It is of no use, Tom ; luck is dead against us.”

“It almost looks like it, Dick ; but never mind, old boy. Faint heart, you know.”

Although Welsh Tom said this in a tone of cheerfulness, there was a serious expression on his face. The difference between Welsh Tom and Richard Handfield was, that one was always trying to make the best of things, and the other the worst. Just now they were standing by the side of a muddy creek ; along the banks of the creek were two or three score of gold-diggers, puddling the auriferous soil in wooden tubs, or washing it in tin dishes, or rocking it in “cradles,” as tenderly as if those strangely-named implements for the extraction of gold contained their own precious flesh and blood. Black-bearded and brown-bearded men, these ! A gold-digger’s occupation is favourable to the growth of hair. Here were men with beards hanging upon

their breasts, godlike ; here were men whose great curling mustachios gave to their faces a leonine appearance ; here were men whose strong whiskers kissed their shoulders, and gave to their wearers a noble grace, albeit they were not perfumed or bandolined. The open-air life, the freedom of action, the absence of that mental contraction which seems to grow upon one in crowded cities, causing the mind to brood upon subjects confined in narrow circles, tend to make the gold-digger handsome, and brave, and strong. Yet his aim and the aim of the city man are the same ; both work for gold. But in the search for it on new gold-fields, there is more generosity and less meanness than in the cities.

Our two mates, Richard Handfield and Welsh Tom, had come upon the gold strata in the hole they had been sinking for the past three weeks. The gold-diggers on both sides of them were getting at the rate of an ounce of gold a-day per man, and they had every reason to justify them in the hope that they also were in possession of a golden claim. But when they reached the strata of earth in which the gold, from all surrounding indications, ought to have been imbedded, they were dismayed at finding only the merest speck of the metal here and there.

And this morning they had washed a tubful of the soil which should have been auriferous, and were rewarded by not quite two grains of fine gold. It was at these two disappointing grains of gold they were looking, very despondently, when they made the above remarks.

Throwing the tin dish containing the "prospect" to the ground in disgust, Richard asked, petulantly, "What is to be done now?"

"Look out for some fresh ground," answered the Welshman, applying himself to the gold-digger's consolation, a pipe.

"And work for three weeks more, and get nothing at the end of it!"

"Perhaps; and perhaps not." Welsh Tom said this laconically. He was more accustomed than Richard to such-like rebuffs, and was ready to go to work again with a very perfect faith.

"You take it coolly enough," Richard said, digging at the earth viciously with the heel of his boot.

"It's of no use growling," replied the Welshman, with a quiet shrug. "If it was, I'd growl."

Richard looked enviously at the party next to them, who had washed more than half-an-ounce of gold from a tin dishful of earth.

"Just see that," he said, jerking his head spitefully in the direction of the lucky gold-digger.

Welsh Tom nodded. He saw nothing to envy in the other man's good fortune.

"Half-an-ounce to a tin dish," grumbled Richard, "and we got two grains to a tub!"

"Come, come, Dick," said the Welshman, "it can't be helped. Let us go back to the claim. We may find a bit of gold in it yet."

They returned to their ground, and Richard worked at the windlass, while his mate burrowed at the bottom of the hole. But though Tom drove in his pick here, and drove it in there, and although he worked until the perspiration soaked his shirt through and through, Dame Fortune did not smile upon his efforts.

"We will abandon the claim, Dick," he said in the evening, as he stood, hot and tired, at his mate's side, by the windlass. "I don't think we should get a pennyweight of gold out of it if we worked for a month. We will start in the morning for Deadman's Flat. They are getting plenty of gold there, and we may hit upon a good piece of ground. It is only five miles off."

Richard gave a sullen assent, and commenced to dig up the slabs which supported their windlass.

Early the next morning they started off for the new locality.

At the very commencement of the gold-rush a hole had been sunk in Deadman's Flat, and soon afterwards deserted. Most of the adventurers who came on to the field saw this deserted hole, and inferring that the ground had been tested for gold-digging purposes and found worthless, passed on to other spots. But one day, two mates who had been everywhere unfortunate, descended this hole in search of gold, and found the body of a dead man. In the side of the hole was a rusted pick, and as they pulled the pick out of the earth, which was composed of blue clay and cement, they pulled out also some pieces of the conglomerate, which to their infinite delight they discovered to be richly studded with gold. Examining the pick they found upon its point human hair and dried blood, and then they knew that a murder had been committed. A struggle had evidently taken place at the bottom of the hole, and the man had been murdered with the pick. Then the pick had been driven into the side of the hole, and the murderer had climbed to earth's surface, and fled. All this was inference, but it was clear as truth, which spoke at the bottom of the pit, where lay the murdered man. The two hitherto

unfortunate mates were made rich by a murder; they dug their wealth out of a grave, for the hole had an amazing quantity of gold in it, which was theirs by right of conquest. The murderer was never discovered, and in honour to his victim the gold-miners christened the place Deadman's Flat.

Richard and his mate chanced to light upon a vacant piece of ground, of which they entertained great anticipations. All around them the diggers were getting gold—not a mere hand-to-mouth living, but gold to spend, to squander. They had to sink nearly forty feet to get to the gold strata, and part of the sinking was through a toughish kind of rock. The day following that on which they commenced to work, the men in the claim next but one to theirs found a nugget of gold weighing ninety ounces, and hey, presto! no sooner was a nugget found in one claim than nuggets began to be found in many of the others. Not large ones certainly, but nice pieces of gold to handle and look at. The miners on Deadman's Flat were jubilant, not to say uproarious. In the very next claim to theirs the men one day obtained more than a hundred ounces of gold. "All right, this time, Dick!" said the Welshman with a knowing wink; and Dick at once began to reckon up how many thousands of pounds they

would make out of the claim. It was jolly working the sinking of that hole, and they indulged in fond anticipations of the nuggets of gold waiting for them at the bottom. They ate their meals with a relish. Better than all, the heavy gold seemed to be trending in their direction. "We shall find some big bits in the wash-dirt," said Tom. "The gold gets heavier and heavier as it comes down to us; it is more water-worn too. What if we should drop down upon a big nugget!" Ah, what indeed! A big nugget! The dream of a gold-digger's life. When the Welshman indulged in the speculation, he half smiled. Yet why should it not occur to them? It had occurred to scores, to hundreds of other men.

Then Richard began to build all his hopes upon the finding of a nugget larger than any that had been found before, and asked sly questions of his mate as to the biggest nuggets he had ever seen or heard of. He led up to the engrossing subject as if he were putting questions out of a book of catechisms. As thus:—

"Where was gold first discovered, Tom?"

"In New South Wales." (It will be observed that they both ignored ancient history, and that to them the story of Solomon's Temple was a fable.)

"When, Tom?"

"In 1851."

"Where was it found next?"

"In Victoria."

"When, Tom?"

"In 1852."

(Please to understand that these questions were not asked straight off, but at intervals, and artfully, as if the questioner did not wish to be suspected of having any interest in the subject.)

"Were there any large nuggets found in New South Wales, Tom?"

"Yes, lots of 'em. But none came up to the first specimen, which was got near the surface at Bathurst, and which was sold for heaps of money."

"Who found it?"

"An aboriginal shepherd."

"How much did it weigh?"

"Over a hundred pounds—nearly a hundred-weight, I think I heard. There are all sorts of stories told about that first piece of gold, Dick. They say the shepherd, an Australian Native, you know, had been sitting on it or lying on it for years, while he was watching his sheep, until at last he had worn the earth away from the stone

which peeped up at him, all yellow and brown. Being an uncivilized savage, he did not know anything about gold, and did not imagine there was anything strange in the appearance of the stone. But one day he happened to mention to his master that he was in the habit of resting upon a large yellow stone. That led to the discovery; the master took the gold-stone and sold it, and gave the Native ten pounds, who spent it in rum and tobacco, I dare say. I don't know whether this is the true account, Dick: I have heard the story told all sorts of ways."

Richard listened somewhat impatiently, for he was burning to hear of the largest nugget, so that he might estimate the size of the one waiting for them at the bottom of their claim.

"That was only a hundredweight," he said.

"Yes, only a hundredweight," said Welsh Tom, drily.

"There have been plenty of heavier ones, haven't there, Tom?" Richard asked, anxiously.

"There was the Sarah Sands nugget," replied the Welshman, plunging into the subject to please his mate; "found at Ballarat; weighed more than a hundred and thirty pounds."

Richard calculated rapidly; one hundred and thirty pounds, troy, fifteen hundred and sixty ounces, at four pounds an ounce, six thousand two hundred and forty pounds. That was better.

"Then there was the Blanche Barkly nugget, dug up at Kingower," proceeded Welsh Tom. "weighed a hundred and forty five pounds, that did."

Better and better. Richard was immediately engrossed in his process of mental calculation, and achieved a result of six thousand nine hundred and sixty pounds. What a fine sight it would be, all in sovereigns! But it was a pity it was not an even seven thousand pounds, he thought.

"Then there was the Welcome nugget—the biggest lump of gold found yet—found at Ballarat, nearly two hundred feet down. Weighed a hundred and eighty-four pounds."

A hundred and eighty-four pounds! Something like a nugget that! Richard quickly multiplied it by twelve; two thousand two hundred and eight ounces, at four pounds an ounce, eight thousand eight hundred and thirty-two pounds.

He said this aloud, "Eight thousand eight hundred and thirty-two pounds."

"They sold the nugget for ten thousand pounds," said the Welshman.

"Did they? That was glorious. And that was the largest nugget?"

"The largest nugget ever found."

He had obtained the information at last. The largest nugget! Ten thousand sovereigns for one piece of gold, discovered merely by a blow from a pick. The largest nugget ever found! Why they might find a larger! Three hundred-weight, four hundredweight, a quarter of a ton, perhaps!

"Do you think that bigger nuggets will be discovered than those you speak of, Tom?" he asked.

"To be sure. There are some places where gold will be found in great lumps."

This was once a favourite fancy with gold-miners. Some theorists to this day persist that by-and-by men will be cutting solid gold out of the rock with a cold chisel. When that time comes we must have our sovereigns made of iron.

"If we find a big nugget in the claim," said Richard, "and make our fortunes, I shall bid good-bye to the colony, Tom."

"Where will you go?"

“Home!”

It is a simple word and was spoken without much feeling, but the strong Welshman's heart beat more swiftly than usual at the sound of it, and there was a momentary dimness in his eyes.

“I have suffered enough in this colony,” Richard continued, “and shall be glad to turn my back upon it. So will Alice. Perhaps you will come with us, Tom. We'll all go home together in the same ship.”

“You forget I am a ticket-of-leave-man,” said Tom. “My ticket-of-leave only extends to Victoria. If I cross the boundary, the police will soon be on my track.”

He spoke a little bitterly. Home! Yes: he would like to see the Welsh mountains once more. But it was not to be.

“I beg your pardon, Welshman,” Richard said, carelessly. “It was forgetfulness on my part.”

They worked cheerfully, day after day, digging out the bowels of their gold-pit. The miners in the locality would cluster round the hole, which they prophesied would be the richest on Deadman's Flat. One day, a smooth-faced man with a scar beneath his eye, as if it had been burnt, came and

looked down the shaft. Richard was working at the windlass, and as the stranger came up a chill crept over him.

"When do you expect to come on the 'gutter,' mate?" the stranger asked.

"In two or three days," replied Richard, his uneasy feeling increasing. But the man was a perfect stranger to him. He had never seen him before.

"Do you want to sell a share in the claim?" the new-comer asked, presently.

"No."

"I will give you twenty ounces for a third share."

"Don't want to sell, mate."

Richard spoke very shortly, and showed so evident a disinclination to talk with the stranger that the man walked away. That night Richard dreamt that they found a tremendous lump of gold, and that the man with the burnt scar under his eye stole it.

The following day the stranger came again. This time the Welshman was at the windlass, and the stranger found him more sociable than Richard. He lingered for half-an-hour or so, chatting with Welsh Tom.

"He wants to buy into the claim very bad," said the Welshman to Richard, afterwards. "But we won't sell a share in our big nugget, Dick." (He spoke this in a sly tone, for he did not share his mate's dreams of the lump of gold waiting for them at the bottom of the hole.) "His name is Honest Steve, he says."

As they approached nearer and nearer to the gutter of gold, Richard became more and more excited. His brain was busy with schemes for laying out his money to advantage. He had delayed writing to Alice until he could write to her the good news of their wonderful fortune. So unfortunate had he been in his gold-digging career, that he had been unable to send Alice a shilling since he bade her good-bye; and the last letter he had written to her was full of complaining and repining. But the next should not be. No; he would be able to tell her that all their sufferings were ended at last. His heart felt so glad that he spoke to the Welshman about her; and his mate encouraged him, and drew him on to talk of Alice. Welsh Tom, in his simple way, was a true friend to Richard's wife.

At length the indications in their shaft told them

that they were very near the golden gutter. Richard examined every bucketful of earth as he pulled it up. Then he received the signal that his mate wished to ascend, and the next time he pulled up the bucket, it had Welsh Tom in it instead of dull clay.

"Now, Dick," said Tom, with a pale face, "we are on the gutter. All the stuff that comes out of the hole must be put aside by itself. Before we commence, let us go and have a nobbler."*

They went to a shanty where grog was sold on the sly—that is to say, where grog was sold without a licence—and spent their last two shillings in two nobblers of whisky, which they drank with the usual salutation of "Here's luck, mate!" They drank it hurriedly, for they were dreadfully anxious to get back to their shaft. It had got wind that Welsh Tom and his mate were on the gutter, and a little knot of diggers was assembled to see the gold out of the first tubful of stuff. Half-a-dozen buckets of earth, taken from the gutter, were soon on the surface, and Welsh Tom ascended the shaft, looking very much disturbed. The earth was carried

* Nobbler—the Australian term for a glass of wine or spirits.

to a neighbouring creek, and put into a tub, and then the process of gold-washing commenced. Richard poured water into the tub with a ladle, and Tom puddled the stuff with a short-handled shovel, and let the overflow of muddied water run into the creek. All heavy metal, of course, sank to the bottom of the tub, and only the refuse earth which contained no gold, or out of which the gold had been puddled, floated to the top, and was allowed to escape. Soon, the contents of the tub were reduced by one-half, and then the stuff was manipulated more carefully. Every now and then the Welshman lifted a shovelful of the muddy mixture from the bottom of the tub, and poured clear water over it, and examined it. Richard noticed with uneasiness that every time he did this, his face grew paler.

After about an hour's tub-work, the stuff was passed through a riddled dish, and the large stones thrown aside. By this time, the tub was only one-fifth full. When the riddling process was completed, what remained was put into a "cradle," and submitted to a gentle rocking, Richard continuing to pour water over it. There then remained not quite a tin-dishful of stuff. Taking the dish in his two hands, the Welshman bent over the

creek, and scooped up a little water with the dish, which he rotated deftly and delicately. The stooping brought the blood to his head, but when he stood upright to rest, his face grew quite white.

The diggers pressed anxiously round as the Welshman continued to work, and as they followed with watchful eyes the progress of the operation, a grave expression stole into their countenances. The stuff grew less and less. The tin dish was only half-full now. Another five minutes, and half of this was gone; a few minutes more, and nine-tenths of the contents of the dish had floated off. The on-lookers shook their heads, and crept slowly away, one by one.

Biting his lips, Richard watched the earth melt in the water, and grudged every speck of it that floated out of the dish. Now came the trying moment. The stuff was reduced to about sufficient to fill a large tablespoon. This lay at the side of the dish, and beneath it all the gold which the tubful of auriferous soil had contained must of necessity have been collected. Taking some clear water in the dish, the Welshman rotated it gently, delicately. Little by little, the pasty remnant melted off; then, with one skilful swing, the promised treasures of

their golden claim were laid bare, and Richard saw——

Two minute specks of gold mocking him from the bottom of the dish !

The claim was worthless.

CHAPTER IV.

HONEST STEVE.

RICHARD HANDFIELD groaned, and looked with a kind of dismay at the gold.

There lay the fulfilment of his extravagant hopes—there lay the promise of his precious nugget, which he would not sell for ten thousand pounds—there lay his dreams of the future, the happiness of his life, the compensation for past suffering—two miserable specks of gold, not worth two-pence! He clutched at his hair, and sitting upon the inverted tub, rested his chin in his palms, and despaired.

What was the use of working? He was marked out by misfortune, and it was labour thrown away to struggle against it. It pursued him, and mocked him with false hopes. Of what use was it for him to continue to struggle?

A pretty thing! That he should so lower himself for such a result—he, a gentleman! That he

should slave, walk till his feet were blistered, work till his hands were like the hands of a common man, sweat in the sun till the skin peeled off his face, mix with common men, herd with common natures, be "hail, fellow" with creatures so far beneath him—and all for this! The two little specks of gold lay in the bright tin dish, and seemed to mock him with their yellow eyes. He wished he could have hurt them as they hurt him. He would have liked to dash them to the ground and tread them into the rock with his iron heel, till he made them groan as they made him groan!

Welsh Tom took the matter much more philosophically. If it had not been that he saw Richard's distress, and sympathised with him, he would have been inclined to smile at the two-pennyworth of gold which lay in the dish. Your true heroes are those who accept the inevitable, and who, knowing they are defeated, still retain their courage. It is easy to be brave when fortune is with you—then, the virtue of bravery is of the milk-and-water kind. But to be brave when fortune is against you is god-like. Welsh Tom did not blame mankind and all the world because he was unfortunate. It was a fair fight

he was fighting with nature for her treasures. Well, he was unsuccessful, that was all. He would try again.

All the gold-diggers but one had strolled away when they saw the result of the washing. The one who remained was Honest Steve, the man who had offered to give twenty ounces of gold for a third share in the claim. Looking up, Richard Handfield saw him.

"Would you give twenty ounces for a third share now?" Richard asked, in a bitter tone.

"Not likely," was the reply.

What was the sudden fear that came upon him as the stranger spoke? Richard tried to shake it off, not quite successfully. Psha! What was there in the man to be afraid of?

"Not likely," the stranger repeated. "It was a good job for me you didn't take my twenty ounces, mate. I laid it out to better advantage, I think."

Honest Steve spoke this in a tone which invited further inquiry. But as neither Richard nor the Welshman said anything just then, he volunteered a piece of gratuitous information,

"I bought a claim on the gutter," he said.

Now, this was interesting; and the Welshman asked, "Are you on the gold?"

"Not yet. I'm in a bit of a fix. I haven't a mate. I am looking out for one now."

"Ah," Richard said, querulously, thinking of their last two shillings which they had spent that morning in whisky. "I suppose you want some one to give you twenty ounces for a share."

"No," Honest Steve said, carelessly. "I would like a mate or even two mates, and go fair shares, and stand all the risk myself, for the claim is sure to turn out well."

"That's magnanimous," Richard said, contemptuously. He hated ostentatious generosity. The insolence of his tone might have fired any man with resentment, but it did not appear to make any impression upon Honest Steve.

"I tell you what it is," he said, quietly and respectfully, addressing himself especially to Richard, "I like the way you two work together, and I should be glad if you would let me go mates with you."

Both matter and manner were mollifying to Richard. They were eminently respectful, as if Honest Steve knew and admitted Richard's superiority. He took the Welshman aside, and said,

"Well, Tom, what do you think?"

"I don't like him," Tom said.

It is a singular proof of the contrariety of human nature, that no sooner did the Welshman say he did not like Honest Steve than Richard's dislike began to melt away.

"I did not know you were prejudiced, Tom," he said.

"I'm not prejudiced, but there is something about him that tells me not to mate with him."

"What is it?"

"I can't say. It is beyond me. The people round about where I was born and bred are a little superstitious."

"That's it! Superstition is always unreasonable. Look here, Tom. The claim we hold is a duffer, isn't it?"

"I think so."

"His claim may be a golden one. Why should we throw a chance away? If he did not believe it to be good, he wouldn't have given twenty ounces for it."

The Welshman saw that Richard was in favour of the stranger's proposition; he was in the habit of practising unselfishness—it was his nature to do so. It *would* be a pity, perhaps, to throw away the chance. Yet Honest Steve's generosity puzzled

him. Never mind, he would do as his mate wished.

"All right, Dick!" he said. "We will join him."

They returned to where Honest Steve was standing. He had been watching them furtively as they held their conference.

"Well, Steve," said Welsh Tom, "we will go mates with you."

"Good!" said Honest Steve. "Let us shake hands upon it."

They shook hands; a cold shiver chilled the Welshman's marrow as Honest Steve's hand rested in his.

"Dick," he whispered, as they proceeded towards their new claim, "I feel as if some one was walking over my grave!"

CHAPTER V.

THE WELSHMAN READS HIS LAST CHAPTER IN THE OLD WELSH BIBLE.

IN a small blind gully, rejoicing in the name of Breakneck, to which there had once been a slight rush, but which was now almost deserted, there still remained a solitary tent. It attracted no particular attention. It was not unusual for diggers to put up their tents in out-of-the-way places, some distance from the claims they were working; and no comment was caused by the circumstance that but very lately this tent had been sold for a trifle to new-comers. Breakneck Gully had been so named because, to get to it, one had to descend a range of precipitous hills, with here and there dense clumps of bush and timber, leading into treacherous hollows. From its peculiar situation, Breakneck Gully always wore a dismal appearance; it almost seemed as if the surrounding ranges were striving to hide it

from the sun. In the day-time, when little streaks of light peeped timidly into its depths, but never lingered there, it was cheerless enough: in the night its gloom was terrible. The gully was about four miles from the main rush; and those who had to walk past it in the night were glad when they left it and its gloomy shades behind them. When it was first discovered, great hopes were entertained that some rich patches of gold would be found there; but, although the ground had been pretty well turned over, none of the claims yielded more than sufficient to purchase bread and meat, and it was soon deserted for more auriferous localities.

One evening, a few weeks after Welsh Tom and Richard Handfield had admitted Honest Steve into partnership, four men were busy within this solitary tent. They might have been ordinary diggers, preparing for supper and their night's rest. They were dressed in the regular digger's costume; and tub, cradle, and tin dishes, huddled into a corner, would have been considered sufficiently indicative of the nature of their pursuits. Yet there was about them a manner which did not favour the hypothesis of their being honest workers of the soil. They had an evil look upon their faces; they moved about the tent stealthily and suspiciously;

and there was a somewhat too ostentatious display of firearms. Indeed, they were none other than Jim Pizey and his gang.

"Keep a good look-out, Ralph," said Jim Pizey to one who was stationed as a sentinel near the door. "Let us know if you hear anyone coming."

"All right," was the reply.

"How much longer are we going to hang about here?" asked Ned Rutt. "I'm tired of waiting. It's my opinion we're only wasting our time."

"I don't know," said Jim Pizey. "It will be the first time the Oysterman ever failed, if he fails now. He seems pretty confident. But I wish he would finish his job. We shall have to be away from here, anyhow, in a couple of days."

"Isn't Nuttall to have the money in his place by Christmas?"

"Yes; we shall have lots of time to get to the Station. We have to hang on there a bit, you know. We've had cursed bad luck as yet; but we'll make up for it. I'd like to have Dick Handfield with us. He'd save us a lot of trouble, and it would prevent his peaching afterwards."

"He knew about the plant in Melbourne, didn't he?" asked the sentinel.

"Yes, but he escaped us somehow. I wish we

had cut the skunk's damned throat for him. Directly the affair is blown, he'll know who did it, and he'll split upon us to a certainty."

A dark look came into Jim Pizey's face as he said this.

"I'd think no more of squeezing the life out of him who'd split than I would of——" he finished the sentence by knocking the ashes out of his pipe in a significant manner. "Out of *him* especially," he continued, taking a letter from his pocket, and reading part of it; "I've a score of my own to settle with him. I couldn't make out at first what made Milly turn informer against us; but I know now how it was. Dick Handfield's white-faced wife got hold of her, and frightened her. I didn't think Milly would do it, though, for I liked the girl, and I thought she liked me. There's the baby, too. It's a pity for *that*! If the Oyster-man succeeds in what he is trying, I'll write to Old Flick telling him how we're getting along."

At this moment, the man at the door, who had been addressed as Ralph, turned his head, and said, "Hush! some one coming."

Not a word was spoken in reply, but each man grasped his weapon, and assumed an attitude of watchfulness.

"All right," presently said the sentinel. "It's the Tenderhearted Oysterman."

And in walked, whistling, Honest Steve !

He nodded to his comrades, and, seating himself upon a stretcher, took out his pipe. Having slowly filled it, and lighted it, he said,

"Well, Jim, how is it getting on ? "

"How do I know ? " returned Jim Pizey. "We're waiting for you to tell us that. Here we are, hanging about for you, and, for all I know, wasting our time to no purpose."

"Strike me cruel !" exclaimed the Oysterman. "Did you ever know the Oysterman bungle a job ? "

"No : but you're a precious long time over this one. I'd strangle the pair of them before I'd be done by them."

"And so will I, before I'm done by them. I don't want you to tell me how to do my work."

"How much longer are we to wait here ? "

"Mates and gentlemen," said the Oysterman, speaking very slowly, "it is my pleasing duty to inform you, as we say in Parliament, and notwithstanding the insinuations thrown out by my honourable friend and mate, Jim Pizey, Esquire,

that I think we may look upon the job as pretty well done."

"Stop your palaver and tell us all about it," observed Jim Pizey.

"Well, then, mates and gentlemen," said the Oysterman——

"We've had enough of that infernal nonsense," interrupted Jim Pizey, angrily. "Can't you speak straightforward?"

"Strike me patient!" exclaimed the Oysterman. "Let a cove speak according to his education, can't you! I'll tell the story my own way, or I won't tell it at all."

"Go on, then," growled Pizey.


"Well, then, to commence all over again: Mates and gentlemen, you know that I'm now an honest, hardworking digger, and mates with Dick Handfield and an infernal fool of a Welshman. When I happened promiscuously to drop across the pair of them, says I to myself, Tenderhearted Oysterman, here's a little bit of work for you to do, and you've got to go in and do it well. There's that plant of Nuttall's at Highlay Station, says I to myself. What if the old cove should have some place to put his money in that we don't know of? Here's Dick Handfield knows every foot of the house and Station.

If we can get him to join us, we can make sure of the tin. We can settle him afterwards, if we like; but have him we must, if we can get hold of him. But, says I to myself, Dick Handfield is an honest young thief. He gave us the slip once before. And, says I to myself, Dick Handfield'll get a good claim, perhaps, and I can't get no hold of him if he does, unless I come it very artful. So, mates and gentlemen, I laid a plot, invented it every bit myself, and when I tell you all about it, as I'm going to do now, I think you'll say I did come it artful, and no mistake."

The Oysterman settled himself upon his seat, in an evident state of enjoyment, and resumed :

"The first thing I thought of, mates and gentlemen, when I came across the pair of them, was that Dick Handfield mustn't suspect that he knew me. You know, mates and gentlemen, that I hadn't shaved for ten years, but I sacrificed everything for my artful plot. I shaved my chin as smooth as a bagatelle ball, and took care to keep myself pretty clean. It was such a long time since I saw my own face, that I assure you, mates and gentlemen, I hardly knew it again. But to prevent any chance of discovery, I bought some acid, and burned this black mark under my eye. That was rather artful,

wasn't it? And, mates and gentlemen, as it spoils my good looks, I hope you'll take it into consideration when we square up, and make me an allowance for it. Then, says I to myself, what name shall we take, Oysterman? And I hit upon Honest Steve, as one that would exactly suit me. Then I began to look about me; it didn't take me long to strike up an acquaintance with the Welshman. He's a simple kind of fool, and will believe anything. It was different with Dick Handfield. I do believe he had some kind of suspicion at first; he looked at me as if he had a sort of an idea that he knew me, and in his damned proud way wouldn't condescend to be civil to me. But I didn't rile up at that; it wasn't my game. I was a bit frightened that my trap wouldn't click, for they had got a claim which every one of us believed was going to turn out pounds weight of gold. But it was a duffer." (Here the Tenderhearted Oysterman chuckled.) "A regular duffer—two grains to the tub—not enough to keep 'em in salt. I was there when they washed out the first tub, and wasn't Dick Handfield down on his luck! Before they came on the gutter I had offered 'em twenty ounces for a third share, but they wouldn't take it. And when Dick Handfield looked up and saw me, he turned



awfully savage. But I had nothing but soft words for him, mates and gentlemen. I put up with all his airs, for I knew my day would come, and it has come, mates and gentlemen, as you will say, presently."

He paused to indulge in the pleasing anticipations of his coming day, and then resumed—

"I had a claim marked out upon the line of the gutter—of course I did not know whether it would turn out good or bad—and I offered to take them in as mates. They jumped at the offer, like a couple of mice jumping into a trap; and after that I got more artful than ever. The long fool of a Welshman, he's a soft sort of cove, and he reads his Bible every night before he goes to bed. Says I to myself, I must turn religious, I must. So I buys a Testament, and I makes it dirty and ragged, as if I had used it a good deal, and I writes my name inside the cover. One day, I leaves this Testament lying on the table—quite by accident, mates and gentlemen—and the Welshman, he comes in, and I twigs him take it up and look at my name on the cover. 'Is this yours, Steve?' he says. 'Yes,' I answers; 'how stupid of me to leave it out; I've had it for twenty years, and I wouldn't take anything for it.' 'I like you for that, Honest

Steve,' he says, the tears almost coming into his eyes—a nice soft fool *he* is!—and he gave me a regular hand-gripe. 'You're a better sort of fellow than I thought you was.' He had never shook hands with me before, and I knew that I had got *him* all right. I was awful pious with him, I can tell you! Then I set on to Dick Handfield. Whenever I spoke to him I called him 'Sir,' and was very respectful. I got him to talk of his being a gentleman, and what a shame it was that such a swell as him should have to work like a common digger. 'The Welshman,' says I, 'he's used to it, and don't mind it; but you ought to be different. It isn't a very gentlemanly thing,' I says to him, 'for you to have to go mates with an old lag'—for the Welshman, you know, mates and gentlemen, is a lag—a lifer, too. Then I got him to drink, and set him and the Welshman quarrelling; and after that, mates and gentlemen, my artful job was pretty well done."

"What are you going to make of all this?" asked Jim Pizey. "I don't see how this will get Dick Handfield to join us. And we must have him, Oysterman, or we shall all swing for it. He's the only one, besides Old Flick, who knows what we're up to."

"Wait till I've done," said the Oysterman, "and you'll see quick enough. I've been mates with the Welshman and Dick Handfield now for four weeks, and the claim's washed up. It has turned out pretty well—but not so well as the diggers round about think it has, which makes it all the better for us. They think we've been keeping them in the dark as to what we've got out of the claim. We haven't divided the gold yet; the Welshman's got charge of that. We're going to divide to-morrow. All the diggers know that we're going to divide to-morrow"—and the Tenderhearted Oysterman laughed and rubbed his knees. "I've took care that they should all know it. That's coming it artful, ain't it?"

"How?" asked Jim Pizey.

"How!" repeated the Oysterman, scornfully, but dropping his voice. "Can't you see through it? The Welshman and Dick Handfield, they've been quarrelling for the last two weeks, as if they'd like to cut each other's throats. I've took care of that. I told Dick Handfield that the Welshman said he was a proud, lazy fool; and I told the Welshman that I heard Dick Handfield swear, if he could get hold of the Welsh Bible, he'd pitch it into the fire. Dick Handfield, he's

been drinking like mad; and this afternoon, mates and gentlemen, this afternoon, they had a regular flare-up; if they hadn't been parted, they'd have had a stand-up fight. Dick Handfield, he goes away swearing that he'll be even with the Welshman yet. And that's the end of my story, mates and gentlemen."

"But what's to come of all this?"

"Can't you see through it yet? What would you say if, before to-morrow morning, I was to bring you the gold the Welshman's taking care of? There's nearly a hundred ounces of it. What do you think I've been working for all this time? You be on the watch to-night, and I'll bring you the gold safe enough. See here, mates and gentlemen"—and he looked about him cautiously, and pulled out a knife—"this is Dick Handfield's knife, this is; I prigged it from him this morning. What if the poor Welshman was to be found to-morrow morning dead in his bed? What if Dick Handfield's knife should be found on the ground, under the bed, with blood on it? The quarrel between Welsh Tom and Dick Handfield remembered—the gold that was going to be divided to-morrow gone—the Welshman stabbed with Dick Handfield's knife: eh, mates and gentlemen? Do

you see now how artful I've been coming it? When Dick Handfield knows that they're after him for murdering his mate—when he knows that his knife is found, covered with blood—he'll be too glad to come with us, so as to get out of the way. Oh, you let the Oysterman alone for doing a job properly! In a dozen hours from now we'll be on the road to Highlay Station, and Dick Handfield will be with us."

"And all this will be done to-night?"

"As sure as thunder!"

"By God! Oysterman," exclaimed Jim Pizey, "you've got a heart of iron!"

"Strike me merciful!" said the Tenderhearted Oysterman. "Me a heart of iron! I've got a heart as soft as a woman's! If I thought I should hurt the poor cove to-night, I'd go and give myself in charge beforehand. There's Ralph, there, if you call him hard-hearted, you wouldn't be far out. But me!" No words can express his villanous enjoyment of this appeal.

"What do you mean?" growled Ralph.

"Mean, you flinty-hearted parent!" said the Tenderhearted Oysterman. "What's the use of your being a father? We've never heard you ask once after your offspring, Grif!"

"How's the young rip getting on?" asked Ralph, surlily. "He's always a disgracing of me!"

"He's getting on very bad," replied the Oysterman; "very bad, isn't he, Jim? He's turned honest, and blacks boots in the streets for a tanner a pair. We gave him a turn, Jim and me, but we didn't pay him; I wasn't going to encourage him. He'll come to no good, won't Grif; he's a down-right sneak."

"There, that's enough of him," growled Ralph; "talk of something else, can't you?"

"Here's an unnatural father for you!" exclaimed the Oysterman, looking round. "Objects to speak about his own offspring! It makes my tender heart bleed to think of his unnaturalness. Give us something to drink; I'm dry with talking. I'll stop for a couple of hours before I go back. Everything 'll be quiet then."

Brandy was produced, and the gang of ruffians sat together for some time in the dark, talking in whispers over their vile projects.

The Welshman was alone in his tent. He was lying upon his bed, thinking over his quarrel with Richard Handfield; thinking how sorry he was that

there should have been any quarrel at all, and how he would like to make it up. He could not help reflecting how strange it was that he had never quarrelled with Richard until Honest Steve had joined them. He had not been quite imposed upon by Honest Steve; he had all along entertained a doubt of that worthy's genuineness, and all his simple predilections were in favour of Richard Handfield. But he had been taken in by Honest Steve's story of the Bible. There were two common beds in the tent, one belonging to Handfield, the other to himself. Honest Steve had a little tent of his own, close by. The Welshman cast many glances at the unoccupied bed, wishing that Handfield would come, so that the difference between them might be healed. The more he thought over the matter, the more he was convinced that an explanation would set it all right. There were many good points about Handfield, which had won upon the simple Welshman; and he did think that his mate's lot was a hard one. He had seen the picture of Alice, too, which Richard kept about him, and he thought that no man could be bad who was loved by such a woman; her sweet face seemed to elevate his mate in his eyes. And so, as he lay upon his bed thinking over these things, the Welshman

yearned for Richard's return, that a reconciliation might be effected between them.

Richard Handfield was far from a bad man ; but he was a weak man and a coward. He was vacillating, and was easily led for good or evil. Above all, he could not face misfortune. The change in his circumstances before he married Alice, his bitter disappointment at the conduct her father had pursued towards them, and their subsequent misfortunes and poverty, had completely prostrated him. He really looked upon himself as most harshly treated : in his heart he did not believe that any other man in the world had as much to bear as himself ; and he writhed and fretted at his hard lot. The weak points in his character would scarcely have made their appearance in prosperity ; but under the lash of misfortune they thrust themselves out, pricking him sorely, and causing him to appear in a very unamiable light. He was intensely weak, intensely vacillating, intensely selfish ; and his utter want of moral courage was bringing him to the brink of a terrible precipice.

It was past nine o'clock in the evening when Richard, who had been drinking at some of the sly grog-shanties, came to the tent. It would have been better for him had he not come home that

night. It is awful to think upon what slight threads of chance a man's destiny hangs! He had not intended to sleep that night in the Welshman's tent, but a stray remark had changed his resolution. The quarrel between the two mates had been incidentally mentioned in conversation at the shanty where Richard was drinking, and a digger jokingly observed that he supposed Richard would be afraid to sleep that night in the Welshman's tent. That remark decided him. He was not going to have the charge of cowardice brought against him. It also prevented his drinking to excess, for he determined to go home early.

When he entered, the Welshman sprang from his bed, and Richard started back, expecting a blow. He was much astonished when the Welshman, holding out his hand, said,—

“Dick, let's shake hands. If you are sorry for the quarrel we have had, so am I. Why should we two fall out?”

Richard made no response.

“I have been thinking over things, Dick,” the Welshman said, “and the more I think the more certain I am that it is all a mistake. Come—we have seen bad luck and good luck together. Let us shake hands.”

Richard put out his hand, but not so readily as the Welshman, nor with a similar heartiness.

"I'll shake hands with you, Tom," he said; "and I'm sorry that we quarrelled. But you had no right to say of me that I was a proud, lazy fool."

"I said nothing of the sort," said the Welshman. "Whatever I've said, I've said to your face. I'm not mean enough to speak against a man when his back's turned. Who told you I said so?"

"Honest Steve."

It flashed across the Welshman's mind, that they had both been deceived by Honest Steve.

"You remember my telling you my story, Dick, when we camped out?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You remember that part about my mother?"

"Yes."

"And the Bible she gave me?"

"Yes."

"All the gold in Victoria could not buy that Bible of me, Dick."

"I don't think it could, Tom."

"And yet I was told that you swore to burn my Bible, when you could lay hands on it."

"Whoever told you so told a lie. I'm not very sober, but you can believe me."

"I do. We've both been put upon by Steve. He told me you swore this, and you may guess my blood was up."

"I should think so. But why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because Steve made me promise not to say anything about it. I suppose he made you promise the same?"

Richard nodded, and said, half musingly, "What could be his motive?"

"Never mind his motive. To-morrow morning we share the gold, and when we have squared up, we'll break with Steve, and you and I will stick together as mates, if you like. I'll tell him my opinion of him, too. Shake hands again, Dick."

They shook hands once more, and the two mates were friends again. Softened by the reconciliation, they fell into confidential conversation.

"I can't fathom his motive, Tom," said Richard, harping upon the theme. "Steve has done this for a purpose. Did you ever meet with him before?"

"No."

"You remember how he came and offered to mate with us? There didn't seem anything strange in it then, but now it seems to bear a different light. He has been playing upon both of us. He played

upon me, knowing my cursed pride"—the Welshman patted Richard's knee—"he told me it was a degradation to me to mate with a—a——"

"Say it, Dick," said the Welshman, gently. "It was a degradation to you to go mates with a ticket-of-leave man."

"Yes, he said that. And I—although I know that you are innocent, Tom, old fellow,——"

"Thank you, Dick."

—"and, although I know that you are the best-hearted fellow in the world—I listened to him, and believed him."

The Welshman sighed, and said, "It was natural, Dick ; it was natural."

"It was nothing of the sort ; I ought to have known better. But I didn't think, Tom, that's the truth." Richard spoke in a tone of self-reproach ; he was ashamed of his selfishness, and of the unjust thoughts he had harboured towards his mate.

"There's enough of him," said the Welshman, heartily. "We'll talk no more about him, and tomorrow we will wash our hands of him. And now, Dick,"—he hesitated before he proceeded, for he was about to speak of a subject which needed delicate handling—"And now, Dick, I want to speak to you about your wife."

"Well, Tom," said Richard; in his then mood, when all harsh feeling was banished from his mind, the thought of his wife harmonised with his gentler humour. But even at that moment a sharp pang quivered through him, as the image of Alice, alone in Melbourne, without a friend, rose before him. Then there was the additional sting of his own misconduct. If Alice knew how he had been drinking lately, after all his promises and good resolutions! Little thrills of shame tingled through every nerve of his body.

"When men and women marry," said the Welshman, made bold by Richard's subdued voice and manner, "they owe a duty to each other, which I think it is sinful to forget. You have forgotten your duty, Dick. If your wife is anything like the picture you have of her, she wouldn't forget hers, I'll stake my life on it."

"She is the best and dearest woman in the world," said Richard; "and the most unfortunate, for she met me, and—and loved me, who am no more worthy of her than I am of heaven." (It is often in this way that selfish men atone for their bad conduct. As if gentle self-accusation can heal cruel acts!) "If she had never seen me, it would have been better for her."

"But she did see you, and she married you, Dick, so it's not very wise to speak like that now. How long is it since you have written to her?"

"It must be five or six weeks," answered Richard. The Welshman looked grave. "There is no excuse for me, I know. But I had not courage."

"There is no excuse for you," said the Welshman. "I wish I had the good fortune to possess such a wife."

"You deserve one better than I do, Tom," said Richard, remorsefully.

"That's a good hearing—not for me, but for you. It sounds as if you were more grateful. Think of her without a friend in Melbourne, waiting, waiting, waiting! Poor thing! who has she to lean upon but you? Write to her to-morrow. I tell you what we'll do, Dick? When we've divided the gold—there are more than ninety ounces—we'll put our two shares together, and we'll take your wife in mates with us. We'll divide our shares into three, and you shall send her her share with your letter."

Richard pressed his mate's hand.

"You are a good fellow, Welshman," he said. "We'll talk over it in the morning."

"No; we'll settle it now. I've no one depending

upon me. I haven't much use for my share. For the matter of that, you might have the lot. Why not go to Melbourne, and bring her here? While you're away, I can be putting up a tent for you and her. I will line it with green baize, and make it quite a snugger. I'll get a good claim, too, before you return; you see if I don't."

"She will never be able to rough it, up here."

"Dick," said the Welshman, "what do you think she is doing now, in Melbourne? She must be dreadfully unhappy, away from you, although you do not deserve her. Come, now, make up your mind. This may be a turning-point for you. We may find a big nugget yet, you know, and then you'd be all right again."

"You put new life into me, Welshman. I think I will go to Melbourne, and ask her if she'll come."

"Bravo, Dick! You shall start the day after to-morrow. She'll come, depend upon it. I'll be your friend, Dick, yours and hers. You will see what sort of a tent I'll have ready for you by the time you come back. Now then, write her a letter."

"What is the use, if I am going to Melbourne to-morrow?"

"The post will travel faster than you. Write just two or three lines, and give her a glimpse of sunshine. Her face will be all the brighter for it when she sees you."

Welsh Tom placed writing materials on the table, and Richard sat down to write. Before he commenced, he took from his pocket a small pocket-book, containing the letters Alice had sent him, her picture, and Little Peter's stone heart, which he had picked up on the stairs when he parted from his wife. He opened Alice's last letter, and read it; his heart grew very tender to her as he read. The letter was full of hope, full of encouraging counsel; it bade him not to be cast down, not to despair, not to let any thought of her disturb his mind. She yearned to be with him, but she could wait without repining if he would persevere in his good resolutions. "As I know you will, dear," she wrote, "for my sake, to whom you are all the world. I am not dull, for I think of you always, and of the brighter days to come. Never mind if you are not fortunate at first; fortune will smile upon you—I know, I feel it will. God will never desert us, if we are true to ourselves and to each other. And oh, Richard darling! since you have gone I have witnessed such suffering in others—such misery, en-

dured with patience by poor unfortunate persons—that I feel our lot to be a happy one in comparison with theirs. I think the experience was sent to me as a lesson.” Richard read to the end with moistened eyes.

“God bless her!” he said, and he took her portrait from his pocket-book, and kissed it.

Then he wrote a short letter—a few lines merely—telling Alice that he would be with her almost directly, and mentioning incidentally that he had got rid of a bad man, who was his mate, and that he would bring some gold to Melbourne. He had a postage-stamp in his pocket-book, and to get it he turned out the contents of the book upon the table. As he did so, Little Peter’s stone heart rolled away, and would have fallen if the Welshman had not caught it. Richard sealed his letter, affixed the postage-stamp, and looking towards his mate, started to his feet in surprise.

Welsh Tom was all of a tremble, and his eyes were fixed with a terrified expression upon the stone heart, which lay in his hand.

“Tom!” Richard cried, in alarm.

The Welshman grasped Richard’s wrist, and asked, in a husky voice—

“Where did you get this from?”

"That heart! I picked it up on the stairs when I bade Alice good-bye in Melbourne. I thought it was a good omen. What makes you look upon it so?"

As the Welshman gazed upon that little piece of stone, he saw the woodland, lake, and mountain, which lay around his old Welsh home, where love and peace had reigned until the false friend came to wreck their happiness. The heart-shocks, the stern resolves born of desolation, the flight of his sister, the agony of his mother, his pursuit of the villain who had so ruthlessly violated the sacred ties of friendship and hospitality, the promise of reparation, the false charge, the trial, the condemnation: all this he saw in that little stone heart.

"It is like a sign from the grave," he said. "And you don't know to whom it belongs?"

"No."

"It was my sister's—my poor, lost sister's. I gave it to her in Wales, when she was good. I told you I fancied once I saw her in Melbourne. If she should be alive, Dick—if she should be there! Oh, Dick! Dick!"

"When I get to Melbourne, Tom," Richard said, "I will try and find out all about it. Perhaps Alice knows." And then he thought pityingly of

the bad character of the house in which he had found the heart. "Take courage, Tom, we will find her if she be alive."

"Yes, we will find her," Welsh Tom said, as if speaking to himself; "her and hers, perhaps. It is my duty. If anything happens to me, Dick, promise me that you will take care of her, and be a brother to her."

"What should happen to you, Tom?"

"I cannot tell. I have a foreboding of evil upon me. Promise."

"I do promise."

"Thank you. We will talk to-morrow morning about this"—he placed the stone heart to his lips, and taking from his pocket a chamois-leather bag, nearly filled with gold, he dropped the heart in it, and placed the bag beneath his pillow. "I shall turn in now. I am tired, and I want to go to bed and think."

"All right, Tom, I shall turn in too. I heard to-day of a good bit of ground, and I shall be up early in the morning to have a look at it before I go to Melbourne. Good-night, old fellow."

"Good-night, Dick."

Richard was soon asleep, but the Welshman lay awake for a longer time than usual, reading his

mother's Bible. He had a strange sort of feeling about him. His mind was thronged with old associations. Impelled by some heaven-directed influence, he crept out of bed, and knelt down and prayed. Then he got into bed again, and thought of his sister, and of their once happy home in the old Welsh mountains. He kissed the Bible before he fell asleep; and, as consciousness was fading from him, the last thing he saw, with his inner sense of sight, was the face of his old mother, as he remembered it in his boyish days.

Everything in and around the tent was wrapped in deepest shade. The moon had not yet risen. The stars glimmered dimly in the heavens, and the wind floated by with soft sighs. Scarce the barking of a dog disturbed the stillness. Nothing but the deep breathing of strong men was heard. A solemn hush was over all. Yet there was wakeful life within the tent—wakeful life in the person of the Tenderhearted Oysterman, who, with but little trouble, had succeeded in unfastening the calico door from without. When he was inside, he softly closed the door, and crouched upon the ground, listening to the regular breathing of the sleepers. Satisfied that his entrance had not disturbed them,

he took a piece of phosphorus from his pocket, and rubbed it on the sleeve of his serge shirt. As he held his arm up to his face, a dim, ghastly glare was reflected in his cruel eyes, and upon his cruel lips. He then took out Richard's clasp-knife, and opened it slowly, so as to avoid the click of the spring. His plans were well matured. In the event of any struggle, and of Richard's awaking, he would call out for assistance, and accuse Richard of the murder. He could easily account for his appearance in the tent, and, for the rest, Richard's knife, and the quarrel between the mates, would be sufficient evidence. He thought over all this as he crouched upon the ground, with the open knife in his hand. He slowly drew the bright blade across the phosphoric glare on his sleeve, and then suddenly rose, and bent over the sleeping form of the Welshman. The doomed man was lying upon his back; and his arm, carelessly thrown over his pillow, rested upon the old Welsh Bible. The coverings on the bed were disarranged, and the Welshman's strong, muscular chest was partially bared. If, at that awful moment, he had awakened, it would not have saved him: for the hand of the murderer was raised, and, with one strong, cruel flash, the knife was buried to the hilt in the heart

of the sleeping man ! A sudden start—an agonised quiver of every nerve—a choking, gasping sigh and moan—and the murdered man lay still in death. Not more still was his form than was the form of his murderer. Motionless as a statue, the Tenderhearted Oysterman stood, as if petrified. For a brief space only he so stood ; for presently his muscles relaxed, and he groped under the dead man's pillow for the gold. He uttered a stifled scream as his hand came in contact with the dead man's face ; but directly afterwards, he cursed himself in silence for his folly. When he had found the gold, he turned his phosphorus-lighted sleeve towards the murdered man. He felt sick and faint as the ghastly blue glare fell upon the Welshman's bleeding breast, and with a shudder which he could not repress, the Tenderhearted Oysterman crept stealthily from the tent.

Pale and trembling, he halted for a few moments outside, as if for rest. He could hear nothing but the beating of his heart against his ribs ; he could see nothing but the phosphorescent glare upon his arm. As though he had looked into some weirdly-illuminated mirror, in which he saw a fadeless

picture of his crime, he hurriedly turned up the sleeve, and so shut out the glare. Then he walked towards Breakneck Gully. The loneliness was awful to him. As he crept slowly along—for he had to thread his way for the first mile between deserted claims, and over white hillocks of pipeclay soil—he listened eagerly for the barking of a dog, for any sound that would break the dreadful silence, and divert his thoughts from the deed he had committed. But no sound fell upon his ears; for him the air was full of silent horrors. Strive as he would, he could not rid himself of the fancy that the shadow of the murdered man was gliding after him as he walked along. He dared not look behind him. He almost tumbled into a hole as he quickened his steps, the sooner to reach his comrades' tent; but, recovering himself, he started back with an oath upon his coward lips, for he saw the Welshman's face rise suddenly from the claim. It disappeared as suddenly as his fancy had conjured it up, and he went on his way. As he came to the end of the diggings, a faint light was spreading over the verge of the horizon. The moon was rising. He was thankful for this; the thought that he should have to walk, surrounded by black night, through the wooded range which led to

Breakneck Gully, somewhat daunted him; but he would have the moon now to light him through the bush. He cursed his weakness; he cursed his folly in not having provided himself with brandy to keep up his courage. He needed it; for he could not shake off the idea of the appalling shadow gliding after him. His thoughts travelled back to the tent, and fascinated by the horror of the last hour, he lived it over again. Once more he enters the tent, vividly recalling each minute circumstance; once more he crouches upon the ground, intent and watchful! He takes the piece of phosphorus from his pocket, and rubs it upon his sleeve—there is a blue glare across his eyes as he thinks this part of the tragedy over again—he opens the knife softly, cautiously—he bends over the sleeping man, raises his arm, and strikes! Horror! what is this? Standing directly in his path is a tall, dark form, with gaunt arms stretched towards him. He can see its hair stir, he can hear a sobbing wail issue from its mouth. His craven heart leaps with terror; then a sickly smile of relief passes over his face, for he sees that he has been startled by a tree, its branches trembling in a gust of wind which has just swept by. All nature seemed to cry against him for the coward deed he had committed. The

moon rose slowly behind a veil of mournful clouds ; the stars paled ; the wind gasped and sobbed ; and every leaf and branch quivered as he crept along. Once he closed his eyes as if to shut out the terror which encompassed him ; but more thickly thronged his ghastly fancies, making themselves visible. And when he looked before him once more, a shadow seemed to glide swiftly by him, and to hide itself behind a clump of timber at his right. So strong was this fancy upon him, that he took a knife from his pocket, and held it ready to strike. A sigh of relief escaped him when he had left the clump of timber at his back ; but still he dared not look behind, for the awful shadow was following on his steps. Louder grew the moaning of the wind ; more strongly trembled every leaf and branch ; and a flash of pale lightning glancing suddenly upon his sight, almost blinded him. But not so suddenly that he did not see within it a picture of the Welshman lying upon his stretcher, with a stream of blood flowing from his breast. Then the clouds began to weep ; thick clots of rain fell, like clots of blood, in his path ; and he trod in them, shuddering. He was near the end of his journey now. Within fifty yards of his comrades' tent stood a solitary tree. As he passed it the heavens opened,

and he saw again the vision of the Welshman's bleeding heart, while the now fast-pouring rain seemed to coil a host of bloody symbols round about his feet !

CHAPTER VI.

THE TENDERHEARTED OYSTERMAN TRAPS HIS GAME.

BEFORE the rising of the sun, Richard Handfield was on his way to inspect the new ground, of which he had spoken to his mate on the previous night. When he rose, he did not strike a light, and he trod softly out of the tent, so as not to wake the Welshman. A tender feeling of regard for his mate had sprung up within him; and as he hastened along, with pick and shovel slung over his shoulder, a new happiness took possession of his heart. The reward of right doing is very sweet, and Richard was tasting this, in anticipation, for the first time in his life. To-morrow he would start for Melbourne to join his wife. He knew that no persuasion would be required to induce her to live with him on the gold-fields. He felt very remorseful at his neglect of her: never, since he had known her, had he so truly appreciated her goodness. He thought of her patience, of her sufferings; and the

memory of her sad, sweet face came upon him as he walked along. "She's a dear, good girl," he said to himself. "The Welshman is right; I don't deserve her. Never mind, I'll make it up to her, now; she shall not suffer for me any more." And, with heart and step rivalling each other in lightness, he wended his way to the new ground.

The sun was up when he retraced his steps. He had marked off a claim, and intended returning to it with his mate, after the gold was divided, and they had broken with Honest Steve. When within a quarter of a mile of his tent, just as he was revolving in his mind what could have been Honest Steve's intention in setting him and the Welshman against each other, he heard the word "Murder," spoken by one of two diggers who were coming out of a tent, a few yards before him. Murder! His heart almost ceased to beat, and a sense of impending evil fell upon him. At the rear of the tent, there was a little straggling bush, through which Richard was walking when he heard the word. It arrested him for a moment or two. "Murdered in his bed," the man said; "the knife sticking in him, too! Let's run and see." And they ran off at full speed in the direction of the Welshman's tent. A feeling

of dread came upon Richard, and he was preparing to hasten after the two diggers, when a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and a warning voice cried, "Hist!" in his ear. Turning, he saw the face of Honest Steve.

"Turn back," said Steve: "all's discovered."

"What's discovered?" asked Richard, looking round, bewildered.

"If they catch you," continued Steve, not heeding the question, "they'll lynch you; I heard them swear they'd do it, and I came away, fearful they might set on to me."

"What are you talking about?" asked Richard, a vague terror stealing over him.

"They have read the letter in which you said you had got rid of a bad mate, and was going to Melbourne with the gold. What a mistake it was for you to leave that letter about! I thought you was more fly than that, Dick."

"I don't understand," muttered Richard, putting his hand to his head, confusedly.

"But it wasn't so much that," pursued Honest Steve, "as it was the knife. It was the knife that settled it. It wouldn't have looked so bad, if the knife hadn't been found sticking in him. What made you leave that behind you?"

Instinctively, Richard felt in his pockets; his knife was gone!

"Then they know you've been quarrelling together——"

"Good God!" cried Richard, the full horror of his situation breaking upon him. The Welshman——"

"Murdered, as you know."

"Murdered!"

"It was an infernal cowardly thing for you to do," said Honest Steve, with simulated indignation.

"Do you believe? ——" Richard gasped out.

"Look here!" said Honest Steve. "What's the use of asking me if I believe? Who wouldn't believe, I should like to know? Here he is, found murdered in the tent this morning, your knife sticking in him, the gold gone, your letter upon the table, and you cut away——"

"But I'm going back," cried Richard, in despair.

"Say your prayers first, then," said Honest Steve. "They'll hang you on the nearest tree—they've got the rope already slung. I heard one of them say that he told you last night you was afraid to go home, and that you started off in a rage directly afterwards. The men were speaking of it just now.

When you quarrelled with him yesterday afternoon, you know you said you'd be even with him."

"But we made friends last night."

"Who knows it?"

Richard staggered, and almost fell. The question struck him like a blow. Who knew it? No one. None but the Welshman and himself knew of the reconciliation that had taken place between them. In the eyes of the world they were still enemies. Of what use would be his simple word? He felt that the chain of evidence was too strong for him to attempt to struggle against. What a change had come over his prospects within the last hour! The new life of happiness that had dawned upon him had faded away, and now his future was full of horror. "Fate is against me," he groaned; "what is the use of my struggling?"

But in the midst of his great peril came the thought of the disgrace that would attach to his name. Alice, too; it would be her death. Weak, vacillating, he was, but she must not think him infamous. He was unworthy of her, but he would not bring that disgrace upon her. "I must save her from this misery," he thought; "I must save myself from this shame, if only for her sake. This is some foul plot against me. I may unravel it, if I

have time. Where can I hide?" And then, with that marvellous rapidity of thought which conquers time, he reviewed, in a few brief moments, the whole of the circumstances. He felt that there was no chance of escape if he gave himself up—the net of circumstantial evidence was too strong for him, unaided, to break through. In this most dread extremity, strong points in his character came out. His weakness and vacillation were gone, and he determined, if possible, to clear himself from the imputation of the infamous crime. But to accomplish that, he must be free. Where could he hide? As if in answer to his thought, Honest Steve said—

"See here, Dick. We're mates together, and I ain't going to desert you. You may have killed the Welshman, or you may not. I'm not going to be squeamish about that. One thing's certain—it couldn't look blacker against you. But then it looks a little black against me, too; because you know I'm not a prime favourite. If you like to come with me, I'll show you where you can hide away for a time."

"If you believe I did this deed, why do you wish to save me?" asked Richard.

"I'm coming to that. I don't do it out of love for you, don't deceive yourself. You will find out

soon enough. I've got a purpose to serve. I fell in with some old mates yesterday, and I'm going to join 'em again. You can make one, if you like."

"Explain yourself."

"Let's get away from here, first. The diggers'll be about directly."

Even as they spoke they saw strangers, talking excitedly, coming towards them. They crouched down in the bush, and hid themselves from the men. "The damned villain!" Richard heard one say. "The mean, cowardly villain, to kill poor old Tom! And he put himself up for a gentleman, too, and didn't think us good enough for him!" Honest Steve nudged his companion as if to direct his attention to the speaker. But Richard needed no reminding; he heard the words, and they burnt into him and made him writhe. "If we catch him, we'll lynch him, by God!" exclaimed another. Richard caught sight of their faces, and felt that there would be no mercy for him at their hands. Guiltless as he was, he breathed more freely when they had passed out of hearing.

"Come now," said Honest Steve, "we can't afford to lose time. It is too precious."

In silence, Richard rose and followed him.

They set off stealthily, looking warily about them,

and walked for nearly an hour, Honest Steve leading the way. So well did he know the locality, that they did not encounter a single person. When they came to Breakneck Gully, and were within sight of Jim Pizey's tent—

“Do you know whose tent that is?” he asked.

“No.”

“That's Jim Pizey's tent.”

A light broke upon Richard, but he checked the expression of the thoughts which rushed upon his mind.

“Is Jim Pizey there?” he asked, almost calmly.

“Yes, he's there, waiting for us.”

“Waiting for us!”

“Yes. That's lucky, isn't it?”

“Your voice suddenly sounds familiar to me,” said Richard, turning his eyes upon Steve's face. “Who are you?” Honest Steve passed his hand over his face, and on the instant, Richard, looking at him, recognised him. “Great heavens!” he exclaimed. “You are the Tenderhearted Oysterman!”

The Oysterman nodded and smiled.

“You have shaved the hair off your face to deceive me,” Richard cried. “You made that black mark under your eye for the same purpose. And

you came to us, and lied to us, and played your pious part ——”

The Oysterman with a self-satisfied leer, took his Bible from his pocket, and, tearing out a leaf, lit it from the light of a match, and applied it to his pipe.

“That’s the use I make of it now, Dick,” he said. “Pity to waste it!”

“You villain! We found out last night, Tom and I”—at the mention of his mate’s name, Richard trembled so that he could scarcely stand; he had to steady himself before he could proceed—“we found out last night that you had been lying to both of us, and raising ill blood between us. We found it out last night, and we shook hands and made friends. Thank God, at least, for that!”

“That’s a consolation for you at all events,” said the Tenderhearted Oysterman, in a mocking voice.

“You devil!” Richard cried. “*You* killed poor Tom, and with my knife!”

He struck wildly at the Oysterman, but the Oysterman caught his hand and forced him to the ground. He had not tasted food that morning, and hunger and excitement made him very weak.

“Listen to me,” the Oysterman said, “or I will tie your arms behind you, and give you up to the diggers. That would set me clear with them if

nothing else would. With you, they would make short work. Everybody loved Welsh Tom"—(Richard groaned)—"he was so good, and kind, and considerate. Why, I was fond of him in my way—ay, I was," he repeated, chuckling, as Richard looked at him with a kind of wondering horror. It was one of the most revolting features in this man's character that he was continually vaunting himself as being full of tender feeling. "You know what we wanted you to do in Melbourne: we laid all our plans open to you, and thought you were going to join us. But, somehow or other, you gave us the slip. We thought we had you all right, too, but you was too clever for us that time. Now, you will find we are too clever for you. Do you remember the five-pound note Flick changed into gold—the five-pound which Jim Pizey gave you for your wife's watch? Well, that note was a forged one. So it is a good job you are not going back to Melbourne, for the detectives are after you there, my lad. I was pretty mad when I found you had cut away; but I determined to have you. And when the Tenderhearted Oysterman makes up his mind, blood can't stop him."

He spoke vindictively, almost savagely, and Richard shuddered as he listened.

"I hated you in Melbourne for your infernal airs of superiority. You were too good for the likes of us. Are you too good now? I hated you then, and you were mixed up with some I hated worse than you. There was Grif—that friend and lick-spittle of your wife's—if ever I set eyes on him again, I'll strangle him, by God! I hated you and all your lot. I made up my mind to snare you, and I have. I came to these diggings because I heard you were here; I laid my plans well, you will confess. I won you over by playing upon the meanness in you which makes you think yourself superior to everybody else. I humbled myself enough to you, I hope. Though I did think, at first, that you suspected me."

"I did suspect you."

"I thought so; but I was too clever for you. Well, now my part is played out. What are you going to do? Give yourself up?"

"No."

"What then?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"To join us. There is only one of two things for you to do. Choose."

"What are your plans?"

"We are going to rob Old Nuttall's station."

That's what we want you for. You know the lay of the house, and where the old man would be likely to hide his gold. You owe the old fellow a grudge; you can pay it off. He has treated you badly enough. As he would not give you any of his gold, you can help yourself to some of it. Now for your decision. I have spoken pretty plainly, haven't I?"

"Yes. Give me two minutes to reflect. Nay; you can put up your pistol. I shall not run away, with that charge of murder hanging over my head."

He turned his back to the Oysterman, and thought. He saw it all now; the whole plot was bare before him. He remembered the anxiety of Jim Pizey, when they were in Melbourne, that he should join the gang, for the purpose of sticking up Highlay Station; he remembered the threats they used in their attempt to coerce him. The story of the forged five-pound note he heard now for the first time. Well, that was a portion of their scheme. The part of "Honest Steve" had been played to trap him. The Oysterman had sown dissension between him and the Welshman, had committed the murder, and had stolen his knife for the purpose of implicating him. If he made his escape from the gang, and was taken, he could not establish his

innocence: the chain of evidence against him was complete. But if he consented to join the gang, he might gain information which would clear him from the charge. He had been the dupe; now he would play the fox. He would blind them; he would go with them to his father-in-law's station; in the next few days he would be able to get evidence of the Oysterman's guilt, and then—— But he could not think out the rest. Chance might aid him. If the worst befel, when they got to the station, and he had no means of establishing his innocence, he would save Alice's father; that would be one good thing done. It might be the means of reconciling father and daughter; that would be sweet, though he himself were lost. It would be sweet to be able to do some little good for Alice, even though she would not know he had done it. He knew the desperate character of the men he had to deal with, and that it behoved him to be wary. All this was thought out in less than the two minutes he had asked for.

"I will join you," he said to the Oysterman; "not because it is my inclination to do so, but because I must, as you say. It is better than being strung up by the diggers; I'll keep my life as long as I can."

"That's well said," returned the Oysterman; "but look here, mate. You go in heart and soul with us. No treachery, mind. We know who we've got to deal with. You'll be looked after, I can tell you."

"I suppose I shall," said Richard; "but I must take my chance. It's bad enough being compelled to turn thief and bushranger, but it would be worse if I was caught. I speak as plainly as you, don't I?"

"Bravo, Dick," said the Tenderhearted Oysterman, clapping him on the shoulder; "you're more sensible than I took you for. We shall make a good haul with this job, and when it's done you can get off to America, and turn honest again, if you like. There's Jim Pizey at the door. Let's join him. We'll start directly."

CHAPTER VII.

THE MORAL MERCHANT CALLS A MEETING OF HIS CREDITORS.

THE office of Mr. Zachariah Blemish was situated in one of the busiest and most respectable portions of the City. There was an air of business about it which unmistakeably stamped its character ; its polished mahogany panels seemed absolutely to twinkle with riches. The spirit of pounds, shillings, and pence peeped out of its every corner, and appeared to be cunningly busy over the sum of multiplication—a sum which may be said to comprise the whole duty of mercantile man. The swing-door of the office had a hard time of it—from morn till night it creaked upon its hinges, complainingly. If ever door had occasion to growl, that door had. If ever door bemoaned its hard fate, or protested against being worked to death, that door did. Sometimes it sent forth a piteous wail ; sometimes a long-sustained groan ; sometimes an agonised little

squeak, as much as to say, "Now it is all over with me!" But it wailed, and groaned, and squeaked in vain. There was no rest for it. For weeks, and months, and years, it had been flung open with ferocity, and slammed-to with vindictiveness; for weeks, and months, and years, it had been pushed and banged with venomous cruelty. But a day came when it rested from its labours, and when its wails, and groans, and squeaks, ceased to be heard.

It is surprising what consternation the simple closing of a door can produce. If the swing-door of the office of Mr. Zachariah Blemish had been aware of the dreadful tremor that thrilled through commercial circles on the day that it hung quiescent on its hinges, it would have squeaked of its own accord with fiendish satisfaction. If it could have seen the dismal faces of those ruthless men who had for years so cruelly pushed, and slammed, and banged it, it would have laughed in its baized sleeve, vindictively. But it had no means of satisfying its vindictive feelings, for it was shut out from the busy world, and a gloomy shade encompassed it.

There was great dismay in the City. The office of Mr. Blemish shut up! What could it mean? Was it a temporary suspension; or a total smash? Why, everybody thought he was rolling in wealth.

Everybody asked questions of everybody else. Quite a crowd was congregated outside the office during the whole day; and the outer door was stared at with feelings somewhat akin to awe, as if, like the Sphinx, it contained within its breast the knowledge of an awful mystery. Among the crowd were many members of the Moral Boys' Boot-blackening Reformatory, who stood and stared with the rest, wondering what heroic deed their Moral President had performed. In the midst of the general wonderment came whispers of disastrous speculations; losses in sugar, losses in flour, losses in saltpetre, losses in quicksilver, losses by underwriting, and losses by guarantying. Ships had been wrecked, cattle stations had fallen in value, large firms in India had failed, debtors had absconded. But still, these were trifles to a man of such immense wealth as Blemish was reputed to be. And such a moral man, too!

Later in the day, it was reported that a meeting of creditors had been called, and a dark rumour was circulated that the estate would not pay a shilling in the pound. What were his liabilities? Some said fifty thousand pounds, some said a hundred thousand, some said half a million. The smaller sums were soon indignantly rejected, and the

liabilities were fixed, to the satisfaction of everybody, at half a million. No—not to the satisfaction of everybody; not at all to the satisfaction of his creditors, who were furious. They were a numerous class, but they were small in number compared to those who were not his creditors. With the public, Mr. Zachariah Blemish had never been so popular as he was now. If he had made his appearance in the streets, he would have been stared at and adulated more than ever. For had he not failed for half a million of money? What a rich, unctuous sound the words had, as they were pronounced! They rolled deliciously round the tongue. Half a million of money!

Certainly, he was a public benefactor. If he had poisoned his wife, and murdered every one of his ancient clerks—if he had enticed a dozen inoffensive (and of course, lovely) females into his office, and killed them then and there with a deadly vapour—if he had been for years quietly strangling unsuspecting strangers, and hiding their remains in his cellar until it was so full that it could not hold another limb—if he had been the author of any or all of these highly-spiced sensations, he could not have been more popular than he was in the present circumstances of his position. He had provided the

public with something to talk about, something that it could take home to its wife, and moralise over, and dilate upon, virtuously. It was not every day that a man failed for half-a-million of money, and especially so good a man as Mr. Blemish!

Great was the marvel how he had managed to keep his state unknown and unsuspected for so long a time. For the rumoured losses had not come upon him at once. People had heard him speak, upon various occasions, of losses upon shipments here, of losses upon consignments there, of debtors absconding heavily in his debt, &c., &c.; but he had spoken upon those subjects so pleasantly, that it rather enhanced his credit than otherwise. The impression conveyed was, that those losses had been sustained, but that, large as they were, they were too trifling to affect the position of such a merchant as Blemish. How had he managed to sustain his credit through all those losses, which now, it was seen, must have been enormous? Why at the time the great banquet was given to him, he must have been hopelessly insolvent! He was certainly a marvellously clever man. He was undoubtedly a very great genius; for he had failed for half-a-million of money!

And Mr. Blemish himself—how did he bear the

publication of his downfall? Was he pale, anxious, nervous, humbled, crestfallen? Was he crying and fretting inwardly at his displacement from the pedestal upon which public opinion had seated him? Not at all. He was comfortably located in one of the coziest rooms of his mansion, in handsome dressing-gown and slippers. He was smoking a fragrant Havanah cigar, and drinking iced claret, which he poured from a costly jug, a portion of one of the numerous testimonials presented to him in the course of his moral career. From where he was sitting, he commanded a view of his garden, wherein were blossoming the choicest exotics. His face was as ruddy and as fat as ever—he looked like a man at peace with himself and with all the world. And yet to-morrow he was to meet a host of furious creditors, men whom he had deceived, robbed, swindled, perhaps ruined. He had given instructions that he was at home to nobody except a legal friend, and he was passing the afternoon luxuriously, and enjoying his leisure as such a moral man as himself deserved to enjoy it.

In the evening he had a long consultation with his lawyer, the most eminent man in the profession. Long statements of accounts were examined and discussed; as to what might be said of this item,

and of that. The conversation sometimes assumed an anxious turn, but leisure was found for a little pleasantry. "Do you think it is all right?" asked the honest merchant, with the slightest dash of nervousness in his voice. "Quite right," replied the honest lawyer, cheerfully. Then a few documents were burnt, Mr. Blemish devoting an unusual amount of care to so trivial an operation. After which the honest merchant and the honest lawyer shook hands, without any apparent reason, and smiled approvingly at each other. The lawyer being gone, Mr. Blemish retired to rest, and slept as men sleep whose consciences are at ease. When he rose in the morning, he indulged, as usual, in his shower bath, and, strengthened for the battle, issued forth to meet his foes.

Such foes! Such fierce, malignant foes! The meeting had been called in the commercial room of a great hotel; and the atmosphere of the room was surcharged with scowls. The creditors were broken into knots of three and four each, all of whom were recounting their special grievances with glib volubility. Black looks and savage growls fraternised in the cause against the common enemy. Although each sufferer put forward his case as the worst and blackest, there were no particular dis-

tinguishing features in them. All the creditors had believed Blemish to be a man of vast means ; all had been eager to swell the amount of his indebtedness to them ; and all discovered that they had been diddled. That was the word — Diddled. They had no pity for each other. A dreadful selfishness was rampant among them. It was all ME. He deceived ME : he told ME this : he led ME to believe that. It was more than human nature could stand. They lashed themselves into a fury. They ground their teeth, they clenched their fists, they anathematised the name of Blemish. That is, when Blemish was not present ; when he made his appearance amongst them, the storm, if it had not passed over, was lulled. The great merchant had contrived to make himself look a shade paler than usual. When he entered the room he bowed gravely to the assembled throng, and said that it would perhaps be as well that they should at once proceed to business. The common sense of the proposal striking every one present, they seated themselves immediately round the long table, and waited in anxious expectation ; Mr. Zachariah Blemish being at the head, supported on his right by his legal adviser, who had before him a formidable pile of papers. After a short pause

the great merchant said, that no one regretted more than himself the occasion which had called them together. A sarcastic creditor begged Mr. Blemish's pardon: he (the sarcastic creditor) regretted it a great deal more than Mr. Blemish did or could. The interruption was received with approval by the few, with disapproval by the many—by the latter not out of sympathy for Mr. Blemish, but in consequence of their anxiety to hear what he had to say. That gentleman cast a reproachful glance at the sarcastic creditor, a glance which said, "*I am the sufferer in this affair, if you please; be good enough to understand that;*" and, having thus asserted himself, a victim, whose calamity deserved the respect of every right-minded man, Mr. Blemish proceeded to say that he hoped they would hear him and his legal adviser with patience. He felt how important it was that, at this serious crisis in his career, a proper humility should be exercised towards each other by all parties interested. And, taking into consideration this and the past teaching of his life—which he hoped had been strictly moral—he felt himself called upon, before laying the state of his affairs before the meeting, to pray (and here he raised his eyes devoutly to the ceiling) that their proceedings

might be conducted with Christian toleration, and that wisdom would descend upon and guide their deliberations. After giving utterance to this pious expression of his wishes, he closed his eyes, and, slightly raising his hands, appeared to pray for a few moments; and having thus (like a clergyman bestowing a benediction upon his flock) invoked the blessing of Providence upon his creditors, he motioned to his lawyer, who, shuffling his papers in a business-like manner, opened the ball in a dry matter-of-fact voice.

It was not his business, the lawyer said, to make remarks which would not be considered pertinent to the subject. He believed that the position in which Mr. Zachariah Blemish found himself, commanded the sympathy of every section of the community. (Most of the creditors looked extremely dubious.) Mr. Blemish, a gentleman, a merchant, and a Christian, had, by his conduct, earned the esteem of all with whom he had come in contact, and he trusted to be always able to retain that esteem. His connection with various movements which had for their object the improvement of his fellow man generally—he might mention, among others, the Moral Boys' Boot-blackening Reformatory and the Murray Cod Association—(Pooh! pooh! from the

sarcastic creditor, of which the lawyer took not the slightest notice)—his connection with such associations was enough to prove the kind of man he was. But the profession of which he (the speaker) was a member, could not unfortunately, while in the performance of its duties, take into consideration anything which touched the sympathies. At the present moment he felt this most keenly—for he deeply sympathised with Mr. Blemish's position. But confining himself to hard matter-of-fact, he could not but see that his client had done everything for the best, and that it was only the force of circumstances that had brought him to this pass. Mr. Blemish had struggled for a long time against reverses—against falling markets, against losses by defaulting debtors—but he was unable to hold out any longer. It might be asked, why he had not placed himself in the hands of his creditors before his position had become so desperate as it was now. For it was desperate; there was no denying it. The answer was simple, and easily to be understood. There were in the room many creditors who were merchants. Those men knew how the slightest rumour affected credit, and it was for their sake, as much as for his own, that he had exercised a wise and judicious reticence as to his

affairs. Mr. Blemish was always in hopes of being able to redeem his position. There was no chance of effecting this object if his credit were impaired; and so Mr. Blemish carried on business until he was compelled to succumb. He would not detain them any longer with remarks and explanations, but would at once proceed to figures.

Which he did; disclosing in the process a very disastrous state of affairs indeed. Mr. Blemish owed over a hundred thousand pounds, and his assets, in round numbers, showed a total of some thirty odd thousand. But in those assets there were debts that were bad; some very doubtful; many which it would take considerable trouble and expense to collect. Having fully explained everything, the lawyer sat down with the concluding remark, that Mr. Blemish placed himself unreservedly in the hands of his creditors.

First, a long pause ensued. Then, as if set in motion by a suddenly-loosened spring, everybody spoke at once. One asked the meaning of this: another the meaning of that. Indeed, they asked so many questions at once, that the unfortunate Mr. Blemish raised his hands deprecatingly. When the meeting, in obedience to this deprecating motion, became a little less noisy, Mr. Blemish

suggested that, perhaps, it would be as well that he should retire. They would be able to discuss more freely in his absence. One of the creditors, a man with pimples covering his face, said it was a very sensible suggestion, and that as many unpleasant things might possibly be said which Mr. Blemish would not like to hear, the moral merchant would act wisely by retiring. When he had closed the door behind him, Babel was let loose. The creditors stormed, and fumed, and threatened all manner of things. Some suggested that he should be arrested; others that he should be forced into the Insolvency Court, where vengeance could be wreaked upon him. There were many shades of opinion represented. All the creditors were not violent and unreasonable. There was the meek creditor, who put in mild suggestions, and who was quite ready to vote with the majority, and retire into private life afterwards—a sort of man who could be induced to sign any document, one way or another, with less than half an ounce of persuasion. There was the sarcastic creditor, with whom everything was absurd, ridiculous, nonsensical; he was so persistent in “pooh-poohing” every suggestion, that he soon made himself the most unpopular creditor in the room. There was the creditor who

swore frightful oaths, who banged the table, who got red in the face; and who suggested that the insolvent should first have his nose pulked; and then be kicked down stairs. There was the foreign creditor, who fumed in imperfect English, declaring that the insolvent was "von dam rascal," and vowing in incomprehensible lingo, that Blemish had swindled him, "picked my pocket, sare," of fourteen hundred pounds, not more than a month ago. There was the silent creditor, who did not speak, but was ready to accept any cash composition, however small; he sat quite still, did the silent creditor, for he intended to call a meeting of *his* creditors the very next week, and he was taking mental notes of the behaviour of those present to whom he was indebted. There was the turbulent creditor, (who would *not* be quiet, but who was starting up every other minute with some red-hot impracticable suggestion. And there was the friendly creditor, (who had been quietly assured by Blemish's lawyer that he should be paid in full,) pouring oil upon the troubled waters, and using all his powers of persuasion to allay the torrent of angry feeling.

When the storm subsided, the pimply-faced man was voted to the chair, and the conversation became more reasonable. A great many present, while re-

gretting the state of affairs, thought it would be a pity to put the estate into the Insolvency Court, where it would be eaten up with expenses. It might serve the purpose of unpleasantly exposing Mr. Blemish; but the dividend would be much decreased. Half a loaf was better than no bread. The meek creditor agreed that it would be unwise to put the estate into the Insolvency Court. Mr. Blemish owed him two thousand pounds, and he would like to get as much as he could for it. The friendly creditor judiciously favoured this current of opinion; and he said, that it would perhaps be as well to ask Mr. Blemish if he had any proposition to make. Of course; why had they not thought of that before? Mr. Blemish was at once called in, and in reply to their questions, he said that there were three courses open to the creditors. The first was, that the estate should be wound up in the Insolvency Court; he knew, and they all knew, what would be the result of that proceeding—a long delay, and a loss of fifty per cent. on the realisation of the estate. But, if they resolved upon this, he would at once file his schedule; he was entirely in their hands. The second course was, that the creditors should accept an assignment in satisfaction of their claims; the estate, judiciously ad-

ministered, might turn out better than he expected. The third course was, their acceptance of a proposal which he was happy to say he was in a position to make—for he was not without friends. He had not passed his long career in vain. There were many gentlemen who were ready to assist him in his hour of need ; and it was their kindness and faith in his integrity which enabled him to offer to his creditors four shillings and ninepence in the pound, payable, half in cash, one-fourth at six months, and one-fourth at twelve months, by guaranteed bills. If this were accepted, he could still carry on business, and if prosperity crowned his efforts, he would make it his special aim to pay all his creditors twenty shillings in the pound. When Mr. Blemish had made his statement, he was requested again to retire, and the debate was resumed. But most of the creditors, as prudent business men, felt that to accept the four and nine-pence in the pound was the best thing they could do ; and it was ultimately proposed that Mr. Blemish should be asked if he would increase his offer to five shillings. No, Mr. Blemish said, sadly ; he could not do it ; three-pence in the pound extra would amount to more than his friends were willing to advance. A great deal of discussion and temporising ensued ; until at last Mr. Blemish, on his own

responsibility, increased the offer to four shillings and tenpence halfpenny. The meeting was adjourned till the following day, when the composition was accepted. The deeds of release were drawn up in a singularly short space of time (in truth, they had been prepared before the meeting, a blank being left for the composition sum), the money was paid, the bills were accepted and endorsed; and Mr. Zachariah Blemish was a free man, purged of every worldly debt.

Purged of every worldly debt. Happy man! Mr. Zachariah Blemish held his head very high indeed that afternoon, for he did not owe a shilling in the world. Positively, not a shilling, if we except his butcher and baker, and other domestic purveyors. There is not the slightest doubt that he did not even owe a shilling to those worthy gentlemen to whom he had referred as being willing to assist him in his hour of need, and who had such faith in his integrity. Strange, inexplicable mystery!

It was, doubtless, the high exultation produced by his being free from the thralldom of debt that induced him to stroll into a jeweller's shop, and to purchase a diamond bracelet for a hundred guineas—purchase it, and pay for it, too! This he in-

tended as a present to his wife, to mark the commencement of his new career. It was a white day for him, and he celebrated it accordingly. What a sacrifice for a beggared man to make! A diamond bracelet for his wife on the day of his ruin! A model of a husband!

Sitting that evening in his arm-chair, near the window overlooking his garden of roses, Mr. Zachariah Blemish said to his wife—

“Mrs. Blemish, I think of building another wing to the house. The architect has told me that it will not cost more than a couple of thousand pounds. It will include a billiard-room, and a new dining-room, which will be a great convenience. We are a little bit cramped in our old one.”

Marvel of marvels! What a man of faith was here! No sooner down than he was up again, challenging the world to come on!

The next day his office was opened, and his clerks resumed their stools at their desks, and went on with their journalising and their posting. The swing door recommenced its life of toil, and wailed, and groaned, and squeaked as before. And Mr. Zachariah Blemish moved amongst his fellow-men, with his usual affability. His linen was as spotless and as snowy as ever; his face was still smooth, and

fat, and ruddy. And his reputation—let the truth be told—his reputation, in the eyes of the world, was as spotless as his linen. If there was any difference in the behaviour of his fellow-citizens towards him, it was that they cringed and bowed to him a shade more sycophantishly than before.

Great was Blemish, the Moral Merchant !

CHAPTER VIII.

ALICE AND GRIF MEET FRIENDS UPON THE ROAD.

WITH a dreadful fear at her heart, and her whole frame quivering under the pressure of a terrible excitement, Alice, with Grif by her side, walked swiftly on towards North Melbourne. There lay the road to the open country, away from the sea. The fatigue Alice had undergone the previous day seemed to have had no effect upon her. Poor Milly's death, and the letter which she still unconsciously held crushed in her hand, had strung her nerves to the highest pitch of tension. Poor Milly's death! As she thought of it, her eyes filled with pitiful tears. Her husband's danger! She shuddered at that; and she hurried on the faster. She heard a voice crying, "On! on! and save him! Delay not; you may be in time!" There are periods in life when the mind is so enthralled by one all-engrossing idea, that the body is unconsciously strengthened to bear strains, that, if thought of,

would appear impossible. Delicate as Alice was, she had within her now the strength of twenty women. Her first great fear had destroyed all sense of fatigue. Alice could not think of physical possibilities in presence of her devoted determination to save her husband. She *must* save him. "On, on!" the voice cried to her. "Delay not a moment. Your husband's and your father's safety are in your keeping." Oh, pitiful heaven! if she should be too late. Despair almost seized her at the thought. She possessed but a few shillings, the remains of the money Richard had left her. She yearned for means to take her to her father's Station; and she looked round imploringly, as if she fancied that some good Samaritan, knowing her anxious misery, might come forward, purse in hand, to aid her.

"Have you any money, Grif?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Grif.

"How much?"

"Fourteen bob."

She had about the same amount. It would be sufficient to pay for riding a quarter of the distance, perhaps, and then—why, then she would be worse off than now. Her money gone, where could she obtain the means of completing her journey? No:

they must walk, and their little money must be kept for food. The letter mentioned the date when her father was to complete his purchase of the Station. She rapidly ran over in her mind the intervening days, and she knew that she could accomplish the journey in time, if no accident happened to her, and if her strength held out.

"Are you tired, Grif?"

"No," he answered, stoutly:

"How many miles can we walk in a day?"

"'Tweny, perhaps, Ally; but, lord! it'll kill you."

"I can bear anything now. I don't feel the least bit weak. You don't mind coming with me, Grif?"

"Mind! I'll walk my feet off, and not stop then, Ally, if you tell me to go on."

Their road lay past the burial-ground where Grif had buried his dog Rough. He cast a wistful glance in the direction of the grave, and vindictive feelings towards the Tenderhearted Oysterman burned powerfully within him. All through the piece the Oysterman had been his enemy. "But I'll be even with him yet," Grif muttered, "I'll cry quits with him one day." Grif was possessed with the firm conviction that the time would come when he would be revenged—fully revenged—upon

the Tenderhearted Oysterman, and the thought brought much satisfaction with it.

They walked on for many hours, stopping only once for rest and refreshment. Alice had impressed upon Grif the necessity of economy, and their purchases during the day comprised but a small loaf, some tea and sugar, and a tin can. There were many people on the road, but each traveller appeared so wrapped up in his own concerns as not to have even a glance of wonder for so strange a couple as Alice and Grif. They chose tracks some little distance from the main road, so as to escape observation as much as possible. About mid-day they came to a refreshment-tent, where many a thirsty wayfarer was solacing himself with long drinks of cider and lemonade. They were crossing at the back of this tent, while a woman was drawing water from a well. Coming close to her, Alice saw that she was a Negress—an old woman, whose hair was turning white. When Alice asked her for a draught of water, the old woman said, "Certainly, my dear;" and, regarding Alice's slender form with compassion, she invited her into the tent. Alice thankfully accepted the invitation, and seated herself upon a stool in the back division of the tent. This portion was used as a bedroom. It contained

a very clean-looking bed, made upon canvas, which was tacked to posts of strong "quartering," driven into the ground; a snow-white quilt was spread over the bed. The walls of the room which were simply of calico, lined with green baize, were embellished with two or three religious pictures, pinned or pasted on to the baize.

"You look tired, my dear," said the old woman.

"I am not very tired," said Alice. "I must not be tired; for we have a long distance to walk."

"You are very young, to be walking in the hot sun such a day as this," said the woman.

Alice answered, "Yes; but I have no choice." She spoke hesitatingly, for she had a dread of being questioned. In the secret she had to keep, in the task she had to perform, lay her father's safety and her husband's honour. If others knew what she knew, the peril of both of those who were dear to her would be greater. She almost fainted with terror when the Negress raised the calico door in the centre of the tent, and gently called "Moses!" At her call there entered a Negro, whose hair, also, was almost white.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear," said the old woman; "it is only my husband."

Alice looked up, and saw a face of singular kind-

ness. The eyes of the Negro beamed with benevolence. No one who saw him could doubt that, black as he was, he was a man in whose breast resided humanity's best virtues. The old woman said a few words to him in an undertone, and Moses returned to the store, and brought in lemonade and other refreshments, and laid them before Alice. He handed her a glass of lemonade; it looked deliciously cool, but Alice was compelled to refuse it. The instinctive delicacy of the Negro served him here. He did not ask Alice the reason of her refusal: he knew that she would not drink it because she could not afford to pay for it.

"This is not for payment, young lady," he said. "You are my wife's guest, and you will hurt her if you do not drink."

She did not answer; the Negro's kind action and gentle voice overpowered her, and she could not speak. She raised the lemonade to her hot lips, and felt as if she were drinking in fresh life.

"You, also," said Moses to Grif, who had been attentively watchful; and he handed the lad the jug of lemonade. Grif, without demur, took a long draught, and wiped his lips upon the cuff of his ragged jacket. Then he smiled gravely at Moses, who smiled gravely at him in return. Moses the

Negro lived in Grif's remembrance for ever afterwards, and, indeed, he deserves to be kindly remembered by many whose skins are fairer than his own.

Alice would have departed immediately after this, but the old woman would not allow them to leave without having eaten something. She insisted, too, on bathing Alice's feet. Alice almost wept at the kind treatment of the good old Negress; but she needed all her fortitude for her task, and she repressed her tears. She rested for half-an-hour, and then rose, refreshed and inexpressibly grateful, and kissed and blessed the old woman as she bade her good-bye. Many a thankful look did both Alice and Grif cast back at the woman, who stood at the door of her refreshment-tent and watched them until they were out of sight. They did not walk many miles further that day. Grif, with a peculiar instinct, discovered a sheltered nook where they could camp for the night. He had been thoughtful enough to fill his tin can with water from the old woman's well, and he soon kindled a fire and made tea. After drinking some, Alice, thoroughly wearied, fell asleep, while Grif, stretched upon the ground a short distance off, watched and slumbered by turns. It was a beautifully clear night—

such a night as is only seen during the Australian summer. The soft wind swept gently over the sleeping girl, and the heavens seemed to look down upon her with kindness.

She rose with the first flush of morning, and, strong in her purpose, set out again upon her journey. She struggled on bravely, but she was a weak, delicate girl, and the fatigue she had already undergone was telling sadly upon her. Her limbs were weary, and her feet were very sore; and towards the afternoon a deathly feeling overpowered her. Her strength was giving way. The hot glare of the sun was too much for her to bear, and she sank at the foot of a tree in an almost fainting state. Grif, with a swelling heart, could scarcely keep from crying as he looked at her white face.

"I must rest a little, Grif," Alice said, faintly. "Can you get some water?"

Grif raced down a hollow, where he expected to find a creek; a creek there was, sure enough, but not a drop of moisture in it. Its bed was choked with stones, and dead leaves and branches, and hard mud. He clambered up again, and set off in another direction, and met the same bad fortune. He ran back to Alice, and looked round despair-

ingly as he saw the expression of suffering in her face. There was not a tent near them for miles, and every water hole was dried up. But a hundred yards or so before him was a bullock-dray, toiling painfully along — so painfully, that its wheels squeaked and groaned, as if for pity.

“Stop here half a minute, Ally,” Grif said. “I’ll get some from the bullock-driver.”

And, running off, he soon overtook the dray, and, almost breathless, begged for water.

“A nice thing to ask for!” grumbled the driver. “Look at my bullocks. Water! why, it’s worth more than champagne, such a day as this.”

“I don’t want it for myself,” pleaded Grif; “but she’ll die if you don’t give me a little.”

“Who will die if I don’t give her a little?”

“My sister,” said Grif, boldly. “She’s been walkin’ all day, and she’s dead beat.”

The man cast a queer look at Grif, and, stopping his bullocks, accompanied the lad to where Alice was lying. She had fainted.

“Poor lass!” said the bullock-driver, and, stooping, he raised her head upon his knee, and sprinkled her face with the water he had brought with him. Presently she opened her eyes, and gratefully drank from the tin cup he held to her lips.

"Thank you," she said. "I feel much better. I think I can walk on now."

But, when she rose to her feet, she staggered against the tree.

"You're not strong enough to walk," said the bullock-driver, who had been regarding her with compassionate curiosity. "Which way are you going?"

Learning that their road lay for some distance in the same direction, he offered her a ride upon his dray. The offer was thankfully accepted, and the bullock-driver arranged a comfortable place for Alice to lie in, and assisted her to the top of the dray. Then he cracked his whip, and the bullocks strained at their harness, and the dray creaked slowly onwards. Alice closed her eyes, and yielded herself to the peaceful influences that surrounded her. The awning over the dray protected her from the sun; the grateful shade, the buzz of insect life, even the gentle jolting of the dray and the faint crack of the driver's whip, all invited repose. And the sweet sense of rest that fell upon her brought with it a balm to her bruised spirit. There was good in the world for her still. She had experienced it even in the short time she had been upon her journey. Yesterday, that kind Negro couple—

to-day, this bullock-driver, who ministered unselfishly to her wants. These kind friends were surely sent to help her in the accomplishment of her task—they were omens for good. She lay, with hands clasped, prayerfully, and the weary look faded from her face, and hope rested there instead. And thus she fell asleep, peacefully.

Meantime, Grif and the bullock-driver walked side by side. They did not exchange many words at first. They were studying each other. Grif's face and dress and general manner were evidently puzzles to his new friend.

"You're a rum one," the bullock-driver said to Grif.

Grif acquiesced so readily and quietly, that the puzzle became still more puzzling.

"You told me she was your sister," the driver said, nodding his head towards the dray, where Alice lay sleeping. Grif looked a little dubiously into the face of his companion.

"Is she your sister?"

"Yes," answered Grif, unhesitatingly.

"Are you in the habit of telling fibs, young man?"

Grif did not reply. He was very grateful for the kindness the man had shown to Alice, and, for her

sake, he did not wish to anger him. The driver did not pursue his inquiries, but contented himself with drawing Grif out upon other matters. Grif, glad of any diversion in the conversation, made himself so amusing, that they soon became good friends. When evening came, Grif helped to unyoke the oxen, which, with bells round their necks, were allowed to wander in the bush in search of food. Then they collected some brushwood, and kindled a fire. Tea being made, Alice was roused to partake of it. Rest and soothing thought had brought back somewhat of freshness to her fair young face ; and when she stood before the bullock-driver and thanked him, he lifted his cap with the air of a gentleman, and bowed. Tea being over, he said,—

“ You thanked me just now. I do not know why. It is I who should be thankful, for it is a long time since I sat down to tea in a lady’s company. You will excuse me saying that I look upon this adventure as one of the strangest I have ever met with. It is not from any impertinent curiosity, but from a sincere desire to serve you, that I am emboldened to ask why so young a lady as yourself should be compelled (for I suppose you do not do it from choice) to undergo such a fatigue ? ”

He paused as if expecting Alice to speak, but she did not reply.

"You may trust me," he continued; "for, although I am a bullock-driver, I am a gentleman."

"I am sure of that, sir," said Alice; "your kindness is a sufficient proof."

"That may or may not be. I have lived long enough to have learnt to distrust most things; especially smooth professions. But as bullock-driving is scarcely a gentlemanly occupation, I could have forgiven you for doubting that I am a gentleman. You are a lady; I can see that. You are not this lad's sister!"

"Poor Grif!" said Alice, laying her hand upon his head. "He is not my brother, but he is my very dear friend."

Grif nodded, and that peculiar brightness came into his eyes which dwelt there whenever Alice spoke of him as her friend. The circumstance of his being detected in telling a lie was of the smallest consequence.

"It is really so strange for a gentleman to be a bullock-driver, and I have seen altogether so many queer things in these colonies, that I can easily imagine a set of circumstances (although, of course, I should most probably not guess the truth) which

might place a lady in your position. You will excuse me for speaking thus, will you not?"

"Yes."

"I should like to win your confidence. If my family were to learn that I am a bullock-driver, I think they would go insane, some of them, at the degradation. My parents are at home; they mourned me as dead some years since; and I am dead—to them. Are your parents living? Forgive me," he said, quickly, as her face flushed with pain; "I did not mean to hurt you. I will ask you nothing further. But I *should* like to serve you, for your face reminds me of a sister whom I loved, and who died young."

"I think I could trust you, sir," said Alice; "but it would serve no good purpose, for you could not assist me. I will tell you, in return for your generous speech, that both my father and my husband are living; that it is in connection with them that I am travelling with this poor lad for a companion; and that my poverty compels me to walk. Let this suffice you, I pray."

"It shall suffice me. I will not attempt to trespass upon your confidence."

"Do not think any wrong of me, sir. I am un-

fortunate and unhappy, but it is through no fault of mine."

"I can readily believe it. And now we will change the subject."

They sat talking in the quiet night for an hour or two. Then the shafts of the dray were roofed and hung round with the tarpaulin, and a bed of dried leaves was [made for Alice. Before retiring she beckoned Grif, and they strolled a short distance from the bullock-driver, as he lay smoking his pipe. The cool air was delicious after the dreadful heat of the day. Notwithstanding her one great grief, there was a feeling of devout thankfulness at Alice's heart.

"God is very good, Grif," she said, looking up at the solemn splendour of the stars.

Grif, who always listened to Alice with a feeling almost of veneration, could not find words to reply. He also looked up at heaven's bright beauty, and pondered. If God was so good, why was Alice so unfortunate? Why was she not happy? *She* was good, he knew that. If God was so good, why had Rough been poisoned, why was Little Peter torn from him, why had Milly died, why were they enduring such misery to prevent the doing of a dreadful deed? Of himself, he was doubtful. He might

be really bad, and there was a doubt in his mind whether he deserved any better lot. But there was no doubt in his mind as regarded Alice. She had never done any wrong—never, never! If God was so good, why was Alice so unhappy? He would have liked to run away from her and hide himself in the wood, for he was afraid that she would read his thoughts, which he knew would be displeasing to her. She did read his thoughts; she saw the conflict in his mind; and she took his hand and held it fast in hers.

"God is very good, my dear," she said, earnestly.

"Yes," the boy replied, slowly; "I s'pose He is if you say so, Ally."

"You must not suppose it, Grif; you must believe it."

"I will believe anythin' you tell me, Ally." Blind yet noble faith! Blind, from the very circumstances of his birth and education; noble, because it was founded upon the rock of a good woman's goodness.

"I want you to believe it, not to please me, Grif," Alice said, "but because it is so. If we suffer in this world, we shall be recompensed for it by-and-by."

"That's good. It's what the preacher chap said

when I was in quod ; only he told me it different like. I didn't believe him. But I do you. And yet he wouldn't give me nothin' when I was starvin' ! ”

“ See, now, how good God is,” said Alice ; “ how He has sent us friends when we most needed them. Those good people yesterday—— ”

“ That was a queer move, that was, for niggers,” mused Grif. “ They're the right sort, though. They oughtn't to be black; 'taint right. I've heerd of Black Moses often, but I never sor him before yesterday.”

“ May God bless and prosper them ! And our last friend, too. I think I should have died if this kind man had not assisted us.”

“ He's a good sort of a cove, for a bullock-driver, and no mistake,” said Grif.

“ Do you ever pray, Grif ? ”

“ No ; never knowed how to.”

“ Kneel down with me, dear Grif, and thank the Lord for the good He has sent to us. When I think that, but for the simple act of kindness of that good man, I might be lying helpless, unable to pursue my journey, my heart is full of gratitude.”

They knelt down together, and Alice said a

simple prayer, Grif repeating it after her. When they rose, Alice said,—

“If I am in time to save my husband, I shall bless you all my life, Grif.”

“You’ve got no call to, Ally,” said Grif, half crying. “I’m not a bit of good, I ain’t, and never shall be!”

“You are a dear true-hearted lad, and Heaven will reward you.” And stooping hurriedly, she kissed Grif’s cheek, and went to her bed of dry leaves.

Never before had Grif experienced such a delicious sensation as stole over him at that moment. He trembled with an exquisite pang of wondering happiness, and wrapping himself in a blanket which the bullock-driver had lent him, he lay awake for an hour, nursing the cheek which Alice had kissed, and which was wet with happy tears!

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORY OF SILVER-HEADED JACK.

It was the fourth day of their journey. Grif was trudging along by the side of the weary bullocks, and Alice was sitting upon the dray, under the friendly shade of the tarpaulin. The road seemed very long to Alice, who was pining for the end of her journey; she was sick almost to death. She had dreamed the previous night that she saw her husband with a knife in his hand, standing over her father: rushing forward, with a cry of terror, to arrest his arm, she awoke in an agony of fear and trembling. Thank God! it was but a dream. But if she should be too late! The thought brought such horror with it that she moaned, and pressed her nails into her tender palms, and felt no pain but that of her mental misery. How she envied the travellers on the coach, as it dashed along, with its six horses, at the rate of ten miles an hour—dashed along over the rough roads, winding its

way through the forest of trees, until it disappeared from her sight, taking with it, as it seemed, all she had of hope, and leaving her helpless in her despair! The bullock-driver saw her distress; but he could not help her with money to enable her to travel more swiftly, for, indeed, he was poorer than herself. He was expressing his regret to her that they would have to part on the following morning, as their roads would then diverge.

"I cannot tell you," he said, "how grieved I am that I have not been overtaken by a friend who is travelling your road, and who could have taken you to within twenty miles of your journey's end. He ought to have been up with me this morning; and now it is nearly time to camp, and I don't hear any signs of him. He doesn't travel at this snail's pace, which I see is making you unhappy. He goes along bravely, does Old Jamie."

"I am very grateful to you," said Alice; "indeed, I cannot say how grateful, for you have been a friend to me when I most needed it. I am quite strong now, and shall be able to walk well in the morning. If I can ever repay you——"

"Tut! tut!" interrupted the bullock-driver. "Repay me! It is I who am debtor, not you. I was growing into a brute, and you have made me

human again. I have almost made up my mind to go home, and confess what a bad boy I have been. They did love me, although I was a scamp! Thank you for that look. It is like wine to a man's tired spirit. Many of my old friends will jeer when they find I have come home worse off than when I left. No matter; I can't expect it all sweet. But that's not to the point, now. I wish there were fairies in the Australian woods, and that some gentle sprites would harness themselves to my friend's waggon, and drag it here with a whisk! But there are no fairies in these Antipodean wilds—nothing but dried-up creeks and leafless trees and ugly rocks; the fairies are too wise to make their haunts here. Queen Mab might do something with her team of little atomies. I would like to know of what use her whip of cricket's bone would be to me or old Jamie, and what kind of spring she had to her waggon! Hark!" he exclaimed, as a sound of tinkling bells fell on the ear. "By Jove! Queen Mab has done the trick! If that isn't Old Jamie, I'm a Dutchman!"

And, almost as he spoke, there came into sight a magnificent team of six dark bays, harnessed to an American waggon. They were splendid animals,

and were dressed in handsome substantial harness. The waggon was piled with cases and barrels, and the driver, an elderly man whose face might have been carved out of leather—it was so brown, and looked so tough—was sitting in front, cracking a long whip, and shouting to his horses.

“Hi! there! hi! Get along, Truelove! Now, then, Silver! Pull it up!”

Whereupon the bullock-driver sent the cracker on *his* whip flying in the air, till it tickled the noses of the leading bullocks, and he cried,—

“Hi! there! hi! Get along Strawberry! Now, then, Lazybones! Pull it up!”

“Pull it up!” echoed the teamster, scornfully. “You may well say, pull it up. I’ll pull you up, if you block the road in that way. Make room for a gentleman, if you please. Why, I should be ashamed of myself for a lumbering lazy rascal, if I was you. Here am I, started two days after you, tripping up your heels in less time than it takes to say Jack Robinson! Well, if ever I take to bullock-driving, may I be——”

But here he made a full stop, and turned as red as a peony, for he caught sight of Alice in the bullock dray.

“Almost committed myself,” he whispered to

the bullock-driver, as they shook hands. "I didn't know you had a woman with you."

"She is a lady, Jamie," said the bullock-driver. "I am so glad you have come up, you can't tell. She is going your road, and you'll have to take her on, to-morrow morning."

"All right. If you say so, so it is. It's time we camped. I hurried on to catch you up, so that we might camp together. And who is this?" he asked, pointing to Grif, whose hitherto forlorn appearance was not improved by the dusty road. Not that it gave Grif any concern; his torn clothes, his dirty skin, his almost shoeless feet, mattered not to him. He had no thought of himself.

"This," said the bullock-driver, putting his hand on Grif's head, and looking kindly into Grif's face. "This is one of the anomalies of human nature. I don't know if the family to which he belongs is a numerous one, but if it is"—he paused, and his look changed to one of pity—"if it is, and if the other members of the family are made of the same stuff, they deserve better than this," and he touched Grif's rags, thoughtfully.

There must have been a sort of freemasonry between Old Jamie and his friend; for, ambiguous as was the bullock-driver's speech, the old wag-

goner understood it. He patted Grif kindly on the shoulder, and they then made preparations for camping.

They had a pleasant party that evening. Old Jamie and Alice were friends at once, and Alice's sorrow was lessened thereby.

"Would you believe, miss," said Jamie, when tea was over; "that this obstinate acquaintance of mine——"

"Friend, Jamie, friend," said the bullock-driver.

"Well, friend, then, as the honourable member for bullock-dray allows me to call him—that he obstinately refuses, from a feeling of pride, to go home to his family, who would kill the fatted calf the moment they caught sight of his old phiz; and persists in remaining here in these antipodes, wasting his miserable existence as a bullock-driver?"

"Don't call names, Jamie," said the bullock-driver, "or I'll have your words taken down. Besides, how could you spare me? You know you have told me I'm the only scamp on the road you care to smoke a pipe with."

"I can spare you well enough," said Old Jamie, stoutly. "You are as vain as my black cockatoo, who gives himself airs because he belongs to the

upper ten thousand of his tribe. I'll tell you what keeps him in the colony, miss, when he has no business to be here. It is pride. He wouldn't mind going home if he had twenty thousand pounds in the bank; he wouldn't make so many bones about it. I know lots of people who are pining to go home, but whose pride won't let them go; they came out here to grow rich, and because they haven't grown rich they think it a reproach on them."

"There, there, Jamie," interrupted the bullock-driver; "I will almost promise to go home if you will do one thing."

"What's that?"

"Tell us a story. You have been in the colony long enough to write a book."

"I have that; but writing's not much in my line. I can talk, though, any amount, as you have just heard. But what does the lady say?"

"I should much like to hear you," said Alice.

"And my shock-headed friend?"

Grif grinned, and said he was agreeable to listen; he was very fond of stories, he was.

"Fire away, now," said the bullock-driver. "Something that occurred to yourself; no fibs, mind."

"Very well. Did you remark," he said, addressing Alice, "that when I spoke to my horses, I called one of them Truelove, and one of them Silver? I did not christen them by those names without a reason; and, to prove this, I will, if you please, tell you a real, right-down, veritable, true story, about a mate of mine, called

SILVER-HEADED JACK.

"I have seen so many strange things since I have been in the Colony, and have seen the Colony itself pass through so many wonderful phases, that I sometimes grow bewildered when I think of them, and am apt to confuse one thing with another. When I am walking through Melbourne streets, my memory often carries me back to the time, and that not very long ago, when what are now magnificent, broad thoroughfares, lined with substantial buildings, were but tangled bush, in which one might lose oneself without much trouble. No fairy story can excel, in its imaginative details, the rapid and wondrous changes that have passed over Victoria since the gold discovery. Where banks transact that business which enables them to pay twenty per cent.; where merchants trade and negotiate for shipments from all parts of the world; where

copies of London and Paris swells promenade; and where Fashion parades from morning to night—the Aboriginal stalked but yesterday in all his dirty savagery. You might have seen plenty of them, a dozen years ago, with their boomerangs and their dirty blankets (a luxury which all did not possess), and their black eyes glittering from beneath their dark hair; you may live in Melbourne now for years, and not see a single memento of the original possessor of the soil. They are fast dying out, and by-and-by they will live only in the traditions of the country. I could tell you some stories about them that would make you whistle—I beg your pardon; I forgot that I was speaking to a lady. What I am going to tell you now is the story of Silver-headed Jack.

“He was a mate of mine on the Echuca gold-diggings. Not silver-headed at that time, for he had the glossiest curls I ever saw. There were three of us together: myself, Silver-headed Jack, and Serious Muggins. Serious Muggins was not his proper name, you know, but the diggers have a knack of christening each other anew when they come together, and a name once bestowed sticks to a fellow all over the Colony. Serious Muggins had come out with Silver-headed Jack, and had got the

title because he never smiled. He and Jack had been friends and companions at home, as you will find out presently. They were both about the same age, and of the same build ; but you could not well imagine a greater contrast between any two men, than the contrast between Serious Muggins and Silver-headed Jack.

“ Silver-headed Jack was always smiling ; Serious Muggins was always frowning. If you could have transferred the smile from the face of Silver-headed Jack to that of Serious Muggins, I believe that Muggins would have been by far the handsomer man of the two ; as it was, he was by far the uglier. For face is nothing ; what tells, is the expression that lights it up. If you’ll excuse my being poetical, I should say that the face of Silver-headed Jack was like a bright day, and the face of Serious Muggins like a dark night.

“ Well, we worked together on the Echuca for nearly six months ; and if bad luck ever haunted one and stuck to one, and worried one, and wouldn’t go away from one, bad luck did all that to us. I said there were three of us in a party—myself, Silver-headed Jack, and Serious Muggins ; it was a mistake of mine, for there were four of us—myself, Silver-headed Jack, Serious Muggins, and Bad

Luck. We never sat down to a meal, but Bad Luck sat down with us, and didn't leave us enough to eat. We never marked out a claim, but Bad Luck got to the bottom before us, and took away the gold. We were among the first at a rush to a new flat, and we had marked out our claim, and had stuck our picks in it, when Bad Luck whispered to us that we were out of the line of the gold-lead. So we shifted our pegs, and another party took possession of our claim. We were only a few yards away from each other, and we came upon the gold gutter at the same time. The other party got an ounce of gold to the dish—we got a speck; and when I washed out the 'prospect,' I looked up and saw Bad Luck grinning at us. If it had been a man, we would have stood up and took our revenge. As it was a spirit, we could only swear at it. Which we did, with a will!

“‘Floored again,’ said Silver-headed Jack, as we sat down at night to our mutton and tea and damper, and not much of those; ‘I wonder if we *shall* ever get a rise? Lizzie will die an old maid, and I shall die an old bachelor, if luck doesn't change.’

“‘Or she will be tired of waiting,’ said Serious Muggins, ‘and marry some one else.’

“‘She will never do that, as you know very well,’

returned Jack ; ' when I write home, I will tell her what you say.'

"Serious Muggins did not reply ; but a darker shade stole over his countenance.

"You may guess from this that Silver-headed Jack was in love. He had come away from home, betrothed to a young girl, whose face, judging from the picture he had of her, was just the face that any one might fall in love with, and be proud of. Now, let me tell you what I learned at that time, from my own observation. Serious Muggins and Silver-headed Jack had come out from the same village, had been schoolmates and companions all their lives, and were both in love with the same girl. Jack made no secret of his attachment ; his friend tried to keep *his* locked up in his breast.

"Yet I believe that if ever there was a man madly in love, and if ever there was a man madly jealous of the love he coveted, and which was given to another, that man was Serious Muggins. He had so possessed himself of the love he bore to her, that his lips would quiver, and every feature in his face would twitch, when he saw (as he saw daily) Silver-headed Jack take her letters from his pocket, and read them ; and often, when Jack read aloud little scraps from them, he would go out of the tent

abruptly, and make himself mad with drink at some grog-shanty. Silver-headed Jack could not help seeing this and taking notice of it, but he did not put the same construction upon it as I did.

“‘Poor fellow!’ he would say upon such occasions. ‘You see, Jamie, he was in love with her too, but she wouldn’t have anything to say to him. I don’t wonder it preys upon him; I know it would drive me mad, if I was to lose her. It is her love for me, and the thought of our being together by-and-by, that keeps me good. God bless her!’

“I couldn’t help admiring the young fellow, and wishing him success. At the time that this took place I was between forty and fifty years of age. Twenty years before that, I was in love, too, and with a woman that I thought then, and think now, the best, the purest in the world. I came out to the colony to make a home for her—that was before the gold was discovered. I was unfortunate; it is now a generation since I have heard of her. I was not fit for her—I know that now; she was too good for me. But if heart-photographs could be taken, she would be seen on mine; and the memory of her dwells within me like a star that will light my soul to heaven!

"I never liked Serious Muggins. I always believed that if he could do Silver-headed Jack an ill turn, he would not scruple to do it; and I had observed that the effects of our ill-luck were different upon the two. Serious Muggins actually seemed pleased that we were not successful. You see, he might have argued within himself, that a rich claim would bring Silver-headed Jack nearer to the woman he himself loved. He was like the dog in the manger. I had reason to suspect him; for just before the time came for us to part company, this occurred that I am going to tell you.

"We were working a claim that was just turning out 'tucker.' There were three 'drives' in it, and the last day I worked in them I noticed that the pillars of earth which were left to support the roof were firm and secure. The following morning Serious Muggins had a spell below, and when he came up, Silver-headed Jack took his turn at the bottom. He had not been down a quarter of an hour, when I heard a great thud beneath me, and then a scream. I was working at the windlass, and Serious Muggins was chopping down a tree, a little distance off, for firewood. I cooeyed * to him, and

* A peculiar cry which men in Australia use as a signal.

he came running to me with a face so scared, that I couldn't help noticing it.

"'What's the matter?' he asked, trembling all over.

"'God knows,' I replied, preparing to go down; 'but I expect some part of the claim has fallen in. Lower me gently, and be careful to do exactly what I tell you, when I am at the bottom.'

"'Is Jack below?' he asked, eagerly.

"'You know he is,' I replied, shortly. 'Lower away.'

"By this time two or three other diggers had strolled to the spot, and they lent a hand. When my head was even with the top of the claim, I looked up, and the only thing that struck my notice, was the white face of Serious Muggins, with a wild, triumphant, yet half-frightened look in his eyes. I took a step in the drive in which Silver-headed Jack had been working, and called out to him. I was dreadfully frightened at receiving no answer, and creeping along slowly and cautiously, I found that one of the pillars had given way, and that Silver-headed Jack had been knocked down senseless by the falling earth. Only a part of his body was buried—his head was free. We dug him out after a little trouble, and got him safely up. Five

minutes afterwards, the whole claim tumbled in. Jack was not much hurt. Beyond the shaking, and a few bruises, he had nothing the matter with him. We took away the windlass and our tools, and knocked off work for the day.

“‘It is strange,’ said Silver-headed Jack, as he lay resting on his back, on the bed; ‘I never touched the pillars. I was picking away at the bottom, when, without the slightest warning, the earth tumbled in. Did you notice anything, when you were down this morning?’ he asked of Serious Muggins, who was busy making an Irish stew for tea.

“‘No,’ was the reply.

“‘Did you touch any of the pillars?’ I asked.

“‘No.’

“‘I can’t make it out,’ I said; ‘there has been no rain, and I will take my oath that when I was down yesterday, the claim was safe.’

“‘I thought so, too, when I was last down,’ said Serious Muggins, ‘but we were both mistaken, it appears.’

“‘I was not mistaken,’ I said, in a pointed manner, ‘and as I don’t quite like the look of things, I believe it will be best for us to part. We have had nothing but bad luck since we have been

together. We can't have much worse when we are away from each other, and we may have better. So to-morrow morning, my lads, we'll dissolve partnership.'

"A curious thing happened that night. We all slept in one tent. It was a pretty large one. Well, I woke up in the middle of the night, and, opening my eyes, I saw Serious Muggins sitting up in his bed, and kissing a picture. I thought I saw him crying, too. I must have turned in my bed; for Muggins threw a quick look at me, and hurriedly put out the light. I thought a good deal of this before I fell asleep again. I did not know that he had a picture he set so much store on, and I settled in my mind that it was the picture of Jack's Lizzie that Muggins was kissing, and which he must have taken from under Jack's pillow. Although I suspected Muggins, I couldn't help pitying him.

"In the morning, we dissolved partnership. I would have liked Silver-headed Jack for a mate, but he thought it a point of honour not to part from Serious Muggins. Jack did not entertain any suspicions of foul play, and I did not think I was justified in telling him my suspicions, for, after all, I might have been wrong. It was a pretty common thing for claims to tumble in for all manner of

causes. So we parted, and I went to another diggings.

“It was eighteen months before I saw either of them again. I heard of them at odd times as being now at one place and now at another, but I did not fall in with them. For my own part, during this time, I was always able to make wages, and was always in hopes of making a rich ‘find.’ I should think a gold digger’s life is very much like a gambler’s. There is the same feverish excitement about it, and although you may go on losing and losing, and wasting your time, there is always the chance of a run of luck setting in with the very next deal of the cards. At a new rush, for instance, while you are sinking your claim, you are always speculating as to what it will turn out; and when you go to sleep, you will dream, perhaps, that you have found a nugget as big as your head. Such nuggets have been found, you know. Men at starvation point one day, may be tolerably rich the next. I once gave up a claim in disgust, after working at it for two months. Three miners took it up a few days afterwards, and went home with twelve hundred pounds a piece for a month’s work. If I had driven my pick two inches further, I should have come upon as rich a patch of gold as

was ever found. During those eighteen months that I did not see Silver-headed Jack or Serious Muggins, I had only two mates. You will stare when I tell you that one of them was a woman! and a jolly digger she was! She did as much work at the windlass as a man. Her husband was my mate, first; but he was seized with a paralytic stroke, and was in bed for a twelvemonth. So his wife, like a noble-minded woman as she was, worked for him by day, and nursed him by night. But he [got worse instead of better, and she was advised to take him down to the Melbourne Hospital, if she wanted to save his life. When this occurred, I shifted my quarters, and fell in with my old mates. They were still working together; but they hadn't been much more fortunate than they were when we were all mates. They had a quartz claim, now, though, which they thought was going to turn out splendidly. But a great change had come over Silver-headed Jack. He had not heard of his Lizzie for six months, and he was fretting for means to take him home, to find out the cause of her not writing. In those six months he had grown a dozen years older. I don't think Serious Muggins was very pleased to see me, but Silver-headed Jack was, and he offered me a

share in the claim—a sixth it was—if I would join them. It was a pretty fair offer, for the claim was nearly down to the reef, so I accepted it. Serious Muggins would have objected, I dare say, if he could have done so without being suspected of animosity; but the claim wanted a second man at the windlass, and he knew I was a good miner, so he was forced to put up with me. Well, one day, about three weeks after I joined them, we put in a blast and fired it; and when the smoke cleared away, and Jack got to the bottom of the claim, he sent up a bucket of quartz, in which we could see a good many specks of gold. We had struck the reef, and it promised to turn out well. It turned out a good deal better than we expected. The quartz was about three feet thick, and we calculated that it would run at least six ounces to the ton. We came upon a very rich patch, too—so rich, that I almost danced with delight when I handled the golden-veined lumps of stone. We raised about forty tons of quartz, and made arrangements for having it crushed at a machine that stood hard by. We took some of it to the machine in sacks, and put it, with our own hands, under the iron stampers. We didn't leave the machine until the whole of it was crushed. The first night we were all together

watching the heavy iron stampers, beating down with their one-two-three-four time, and wondering what sort of a cake of gold the forty tons would turn out. I said that I thought there would be at least four hundred ounces.

“‘That will give me five hundred pounds for my share,’ said Silver-headed Jack. ‘I shall put a good wages-man in the claim, and go home to find out why Lizzie has not written to me. I can’t help thinking there is some underhand work going on.’

“‘Psha!’ said Serious Muggins. ‘She’s tired of waiting, and has married some one else. You don’t think a girl will wait for a man until she grows to be an old woman, do you?’”

“‘I don’t know what girls will or will not do,’ said Silver-headed Jack; ‘but I know that my Lizzie would wait for me all her life. I am almost frightened to go home, for fear of hearing that something has happened to her. The world wouldn’t be worth living in without her.’

“‘Have you written to her?’ I asked.

“‘Regularly. Only think of my working all these years, and never till now having the means to send for her, and after all not to know if she is dead or alive! Jamie,’ he said to me, ‘if I was to

hear that she was dead, I'm sure I should go mad, or something dreadful would happen to me. You can't think how I've set my heart on my Lizzie !'

"The crushing of that forty tons of quartz took nearly four days and four nights. They couldn't crush them as fast as they do now. Quartz crushing used to cost six pounds a ton, at that time ; now you can get it done for a pound. Well, it was all passed through the machine, and Jack and I were watching the washing out of the quicksilver. Serious Muggins had gone to the post, to see if there were any letters (for the mail was expected) and he was to get us some supper ready by the time we came home with the gold. You may guess we kept a pretty sharp look-out upon the machine men, as they did their work ; for it would have been the easiest thing in the world for them to have slipped a few pounds weight of the gold and quicksilver on one side, without our being a bit the wiser for it. There was nearly half a bucketful of the mixture. This was poured, about half a pint at a time, into a large chamois leather skin. The skin is porous, and, upon being tightly squeezed, allows a large portion of the pure quicksilver to ooze out, retaining the gold, coated, of course, with quicksilver. It was not until the men

came near the bottom of the bucket that we found how rich was the quartz that had been crushed. The first few skinfuls of quicksilver escaped through the chamois leather like silver-water, and there was but little gold left; but, when we came near the bottom of the bucket, we jumped for joy at finding it was nearly all gold. After all the quicksilver was passed through the leather, the amalgam was put into a large retort, and screwed down. The retort was then put into the furnace. When it was red-hot, the quicksilver began to rise in the iron tube, which is joined to the top of the retort, and came showering down into the pail of water beneath, like a rain of silver stars. I was glad when the shower lessened; for I was half frightened that the gold was being spirited away. Then the retort was taken out of the furnace, and opened, and there lay the beautiful gold, changing, in the process of cooling, into all the colours of the rainbow. I wonder if a miser, in counting his hoardings, experiences the same kind of pleasure that I experienced, when I saw that splendid cake of gold! If he does, his rusty old heart must be lighted up by a very delightful feeling. The cake weighed six hundred and twenty ounces, so that the quartz had averaged nearly sixteen ounces of

gold to the ton. Not so bad that, eh? Silver-headed Jack wrapped up the precious golden saucer in his pocket-handkerchief—it was a pretty good weight, nearly half-a-hundredweight—and we made our way to the tent. I had my revolver cocked, in case of any accident, I can tell you. When we got to the tent, Serious Muggins was waiting for us. Jack opened his handkerchief, and looked at the gold triumphantly. As for me, I was running over with delight.

“‘Got you at last, you beauty!’ I exclaimed. ‘Oh, you sly coquette! What coaxing you want before you give yourself up! Jacob didn’t work harder or more patiently for Laban’s daughter than we have worked for you. Only think, Jack, of this bright beauty hiding herself in the caverns of the earth, and refusing to show herself until we plucked her out of her miserable home! Can you imagine a bright-eyed damsel, Jack, sinking into the earth, and we diving after her, until we catch her in the rock which prevents her escape? Oh, you beauty; I could kiss you!’

“You see, I *am* a bit of a poet.

“‘I will kiss you,’ said Jack, lifting the cake of gold to his lips, ‘for you bring me nearer to my Lizzie. Hallo! Muggins! what’s the matter?’

“ ‘I’ve got bad news for you, Jack,’ said Muggins, who had been shifting uneasily about.

“ ‘What news?’ asked Jack, dropping the gold, and turning quite pale.

“ ‘About Lizzie.’

“ ‘Well, man, go on.’

“ ‘She’s dead, Jack,’ said Muggins, looking as white as Jack himself. ‘The mail’s in.’

“ ‘How do you know she is dead?’ I asked.

“ ‘I have received letters from home.’

“ Jack didn’t say a word, but dropped into his seat, trembling, and covered his face. I beckoned to Serious Muggins, and we stole out of the tent; I thought it was best to let Jack fight with his grief alone. I knew what a blow this was to him. He had not been working for himself, but for his Lizzie; and just at the moment of success, to hear that she was dead—it was terrible! He was in a dreadful bad way about it. As I sat outside the tent, smoking, I heard him talking to himself, strangely. We had left the cake of gold upon the table.

“ ‘You glittering devil,’ I heard him say, ‘why did you lure me away from my Lizzie? If it hadn’t been for you, I should never have left home, and we should have been together now. What

would it have mattered if we had been poor? Why did I fly from happiness to you, you false, cruel devil?’

“I wouldn’t have him disturbed the whole of that night. I knew that all the talking in the world wouldn’t ease him. But when I saw him in the morning, I rubbed my eyes, and thought that I could not be awake. He was sitting upon the bench, with his face resting in his hands, staring fixedly at the cake of gold. He had evidently not moved from his seat during the whole night, and during the night his hair had turned as white as silver! That was how he got to be called Silver-headed Jack. . I tried to rouse him, but the answers he gave me were so vague and wandering, that I was afraid he had gone mad. I saw at once that he was very ill, so I ran for a doctor, who told me that my mate had gone in strong for the brain fever. Sure enough, he had, too. We thought he would never have come out of it, and it’s my belief to this day, that he never would, if one of the strangest things hadn’t happened! I should say it was six weeks after Jack had been struck down. I had nursed him all the time (he wouldn’t let Serious Muggins come near him), and the doctor said he couldn’t last another week. How poor Jack raved

while in that fever! I wonder that *my* hair didn't turn white through the frights he gave me! He used to fancy Lizzie was in the tent with him, and he talked to her so naturally, sometimes waiting for her answers, that often during his pauses, I turned my head, half expecting to see Lizzie's white shade at my shoulder. I was sitting at the door of the tent one evening, listening to Jack's mutterings, for his tongue never seemed to stop. I was very troubled; you see I liked Jack amazingly, and I pitied him, and could sympathise with him, for, as I told you, I had been in love myself. Of course, my pipe was in my mouth. What should we do without tobacco, I wonder! Do you know, I think tobacco prevents a good deal of mischief. What used we to say at school?—'And Satan finds some mischief still, for idle hands to do.' But a man isn't idle when he has a pipe in his mouth; it is occupation for him. And you may laugh at me, if you please; it is elevating too. Men don't plan murder when they have pipes in their mouths. They've got something else to do; they've got to smoke and think—and thinking, when you're smoking, is generally good thinking. I could philosophize on this for an hour, but it's time I finished my story. I will

say, however, that I look upon tobacco as a real good friend.

“ Well, on this evening, I was sitting at the door of the tent, when who should I see coming along the gully where our tent was pitched, but a woman. Our tent was nearly at the foot of the gully, and, of course, there was a hill shelving into it. I saw the woman at the first point of sight on that hill, and it almost seemed as if she came out of the sunlight. There were half-a-dozen tents scattered about, and she stopped at one of them and asked something. Imagine my surprise when I saw the digger to whom she had spoken point to our tent, and when I saw her walking quickly towards me! She was a pretty, modest-looking lassie, and had a quiet, self-possessed air about her, which took me mightily. I was thinking over in my mind all sorts of things as to her, when she came up. My hair stood on end, and my knees began to shake, for I had seen the picture Silver-headed Jack set such great store on, and this lassie’s face so resembled it, that I thought I was looking at a ghost. I believe, if I hadn’t been so completely dumbfounded, I should have run away.

“ ‘Does John Staveley live here?’ asked my ghost.

"John Staveley was Silver-headed Jack's proper name.

" 'He's living here, miss,' said I, 'and he's dying here.'

" 'My God !' she exclaimed, and as she staggered, I caught her in my arms. 'Don't tell me that !'

" 'Who are you ?' I asked.

" 'My name is Elizabeth Truelove,' she answered.

" 'Jack's Lizzie ?' I cried.

" 'Yes,' she said. 'Don't tell me that he's dying.'

" 'He's dying because he heard that you were dead,' I said. 'You aren't dead, are you ?'

" 'No,' she said, holding out her hand. A true woman's lovable little hand—real pleasant flesh and blood.

" 'I think I can see through it,' I said, when I was convinced she wasn't a ghost. 'Jack's very ill. If anybody can save him, you can. But don't be frightened when you see him. He is much changed. His hair turned snow-white the night he heard you were dead. I've been his nurse till now. You may as well go in and take my place.'

" She glided past me, and I walked away. I

went straight to where I knew I should find Serious Muggins. He was in a concert-room, drinking with a lot of diggers. I went up to him quite coolly and slapped his face. He started to his feet, and asked me what I meant by it?

“‘You’re a lying scoundrel,’ I said; ‘and if you don’t understand what I meant by the first tap, I’ll give you another.’ And I gave him another—a pretty smart one, this time.

“He was bound to fight, you see. We went outside, and the diggers made a ring.

“‘Now, mates,’ I said, as I was tucking up my sleeves: he had stripped off his shirt. ‘You all know me pretty well. I have never done a dirty action in my life, and I never mean to do one. This fellow has done the meanest thing I ever heard of. When I have polished him off, I’ll tell you what it is; and then, if you don’t think I’ve done right, you can throw me in the creek, if you like.’

“Serious Muggins fought like a devil. I must do him the justice to say that he was, physically, a brave man. But he had been drinking for a good many weeks, and that told on him. I don’t think I should have licked him but for that. As it was, after an hour’s hard fighting, when I was pretty

well done myself, he threw up his arms. Then, I told the diggers the trick he had played Silver-headed Jack, and how the woman he had said was dead was nursing my mate at the moment I was speaking. If Muggins hadn't been lying nearly lifeless on the ground, they'd have tarred and feathered him. As it was, they declared they would do so the next day. But the next day he was gone, and I never heard anything more of him. He left a rich claim behind him, and it was out of his share of that claim I bought my first team.

"When I got back to the tent, there was Lizzie Truelove nursing poor Jack as tenderly—as a woman, I was going to say. That would have been a nice bull, wouldn't it? Do you know, that although she hadn't been in the tent two hours, it had got quite a different look in that short time. What a little treasure that woman is! It did me good to look at her! It appears that Muggins had intercepted all the letters; and Lizzie, uneasy at not hearing from Jack, and being sure of his constancy, had come out by herself, to learn what had become of him. That was faithful love, wasn't it? I don't think I've any occasion to tell you that Jack got well. He did get well, and he married his

Lizzie after all. He gave up his own name, and took hers when they were married. But although he calls himself John Truelove, everybody else calls him Silver-headed Jack."

CHAPTER X.

MRS. NICHOLAS NUTTALL TAKES POSSESSION.

MRS. NICHOLAS NUTTALL was in a high state of glorification. It wanted but a few days to Christmas, and she and her family were on a visit to their rich squatter relative. The promise that Alice's father had extracted from his brother Nicholas had been strictly kept. Nicholas had not told his wife that his brother had been a married man. He had entered into the compact with a considerable degree of satisfaction, for apart from the sympathy he felt for his brother's unhappiness, he derived a malicious pleasure in the knowledge that he had a secret which he was bound not to reveal to Mrs. Nuttall, and which she would take pleasure in hearing. It was shortly after he had taken upon himself the charge of Little Peter, that Matthew Nuttall told his brother the story of his life. They were riding over the vast tract of land of which he was the possessor, and Nicholas was admiring the noble expanse of

table-land before them. The world was prospering with Matthew; wealth was absolutely growing for him; his flocks were increasing, his rights and freeholds were daily rising in value. With an eager desire for possession, he had bought property all around him, until he had land enough for a kingdom. Some such thought as this stirred him to remark to his brother, that it was a noble estate.

"Grand," Nicholas acquiesced; "they have no thought of such wealth on the other side of the world."

"No," Matthew said, "your plodders in time-worn cities are but slightly acquainted with the wealth of our new world. When I complete my last purchase—I have the money ready in the house, and the deeds will be signed in a few days—Highlay Station will be the most valuable in the colonies. I always had an ambition to become the largest squatter in Australia."

"And you have gained it?"

"And I have gained it." The pride died out of his voice as he uttered the words. He had gained his ambition, but it brought no sweetness with it.

"It is a great thing to say that one has gained his ambition," mused Nicholas. "Not one man in a hundred thousand can say as much."

They rode on in silence for a little while, and presently they entered a wood, where the land was more broken.

"What singular trees!" Nicholas said, pointing to a group of dwarf trees, whose trunks appeared to be suffering from gout.

"That is the Monkey-Bread tree," Matthew replied. "In the proper season—three or four months from now—you would be glad to meet with a group of them, if you were lost in the bush. The fruit of the tree grows to a large size, and is very refreshing to a hungry man."

"And these?" asked Nicholas, pointing to a group, about twenty feet in height, whose green laurel-shaped leaves and delicate red blossoms were an agreeable relief to the sombre growth around them.

Matthew stopped, and dismounting, fastened his horse's bridle to a branch of a small oak; then he threw himself upon the ground, and looked up at the blue clouds through the delicately-coloured blossoms.

"This is our Christmas-tree," he said to Nicholas, who had followed his example. "The last time I saw it in flower was in company with my daughter."

He spoke with bitter effort, and Nicholas held his breath.

"It will relieve me to speak of her, Nicholas," he continued. "She is my only child, and I may never see her again. Do not interrupt me. I may never see her again; and I doubt, even if I saw her before me now, whether I would speak to her and forgive her. It is the curse of my hard nature, and I cannot control it."

"What is her name, Mat?"

"Alice."

Since he saw her last, her name, until now, had never passed his lips. The sound of it brought tender memories to him. Since the night on which he had spoken with Alice upon the sea shore, he had not seen or heard of her. All that there was of human love in his nature he had once delighted to lavish upon her; and now that his resentment at her marriage with Richard Handfield had had time to cool, he half repented of his harshness. It might have been, as he said, that, had she written to him, or directly asked his help, he would still have shut his heart against her. But her very silence pleaded for her. Like a smouldering fire, with no breeze to fan it into flame, his anger was dying out. It was but one

Christmas since that his home was lighted by his daughter's smiles, and made happy by her presence. She was a light-hearted girl then; and he remembered his neighbours' looks of hearty admiration as she played the hostess at the Christmas gathering. He remembered the pride which had filled his heart at the thought that that fair and graceful girl was his daughter; he remembered that Christmas—but one year back—as the pleasantest time in his life. Now, what was he? A lonely, miserable man. He knew that one word from him would alter all this—would bring happiness to his heart, love to his home. He had but to say to his daughter “Come,” and she would have flown to his arms, and be once more what she had hitherto been, the light of his life. But he could not bring himself to speak that word. It was true what he had said—his hard nature was his curse. If a reconciliation could be brought about without any prompting from him, he might accept it; but after saying that he would not forgive her, to hold out the hand of forgiveness, voluntarily!—no, he would not so humiliate himself. And yet it seemed that the more she humbled herself to him, the harder he grew. She had pleaded

eloquently enough, Heaven knows! on the sad night that they two stood together for the last time. The sound of the soft lapping of the sea upon the sands came often to his ears, and often in the night there would come upon his inner sense of sight a vision of white crested waves, with blue depths beyond, and stars shining in them. And never did this memory assert itself without bringing with it the image of his daughter, wrestling with her misery as she wrestled with it that night, with clasped hands, and drooping head, and pleading voice.

With these memories stirring within him, he told his story, pausing often in the narration, and when he had concluded, Nicholas, who had listened in pitying silence, said,—

“Can I do nothing, Mat?”

“Nothing.”

“Yet you love her so—and would be so happy if things were once more as they used to be—as they ought to be. Think! let me go to her, and bring her to you.”

“No! I forbid it, distinctly. If that were done as from me—and it could not be done otherwise now—I believe it would quite harden me. Let matters rest.”

He spoke decidedly, and mounting his horse, led the way back to the house at a sharp trot.

Mrs. Nicholas Nuttall was in her glory. Her arrival at the station had filled her with lofty aspirations. Immediately she set her foot upon it, she, as it were, mentally took possession. The sight of the broad-stretching pasture-land, dotted with sheep and cattle, afforded her ineffable satisfaction. At length, she could see realised the dream of her life. But two nights previously, she had lulled herself to sleep by chattering of her ambition.

"Nicholas, my dear," she said; "I like the look of this place so much, that I think I shall make up my mind to stop."

Accustomed as Nicholas was to the vagaries of his better half, he could not refrain from saying, "But we are only here on a visit, Maria."

"Precisely so, Mr. Nuttall. I do not need you to tell me that. But do you think that life has not its duties?"

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Nicholas.

"Ah! You may well ask, Nicholas, for you have not been troubled much. But I am thankful to think that I have borne with patience and resignation

the trials you have put upon me. I have borne them," said the little woman, heroically, "as a wife should. Have I not, Nicholas?"

Although he was aware that acquiescence would amount to a tacit admission that he was a domestic tyrant, and although he was aware that such an admission on his part was neither more nor less than an act of dastardly cowardice—yet for the sake of peace, Nicholas said, "Yes, you have been a very good wife, Maria." He would dearly like to have added, "or would have been, if you hadn't nagged so!" But he dared not utter such words.

"Yes, life has its duties," pursued Mrs. Nuttall; "none should know that better than a wife and a mother."

For the life of him, Nicholas could not help adding: "Except a husband and a father, my dear." And then he shrank within himself, as though he felt (the candle being out, he could not see) the look which Mrs. Nuttall threw upon his end of the bolster.

"Your coarse jokes are more fitted for a tap-room, than for this chamber," Mrs. Nuttall uttered disdainfully, and was silent for so long a time that Nicholas thought she had abandoned the conversation; but presently she said aloud, so suddenly as to

make Nicholas jump : " And one of the first duties of life is money."

Nicholas pricked up his ears.

" Money is, undoubtedly, one of the first," she continued. " Position is important, but I think Money is before it. Besides, Money gives Position. Therefore, I think I shall stop here."

" At Position, my dear ? "

Mrs. Nuttall did not condescend to reply, and Nicholas waited patiently, knowing that his wife would soon explain herself.

" I am thankful—truly thankful—that I see my child provided for. She will be spared such trials as her mother has gone through ; and, as a mother who knows what she has suffered, I rejoice. How much is your brother to give for his new Station, Nicholas ? "

" Twenty-two thousand pounds, Maria."

" Very good. Although, if my advice was asked, I should say, ' Put your money out at interest where there is no risk, and where you can always clap your hands upon it.' But, of course, my advice is not asked. And he is to pay down in cash—how much, my dear ? "

" Ten thousand pounds."

" Very respectable ! There is nothing that looks

so respectable as being able to pay down, say, ten thousand pounds, when you are called upon. It is but justice to say, that it reflects distinction upon the name of Nuttall, to pay down ten thousand pounds in cash ; and (putting out the question that I might express myself differently if my advice was asked) I really have not much objection to the money being laid out this way."

"It wouldn't much matter if you had, Maria. Mat knows whether an investment is good or not, and generally takes his own advice."

"Precisely so. Things are not far advanced enough for me to go to your brother, and to say, 'Brother-in-law, I do not think this is a judicious investment ; let the money remain out at interest, until something better offers.' Things are not far advanced enough for that yet. When the proper time comes, I shall, of course, do so if I think it necessary."

"You don't mean to say, seriously, Maria, that you believe Mat would care a farthing rushlight for your advice on any of his speculations ?"

"Setting aside the vulgar expression of a farthing rushlight—although you might remember, Nicholas, that we are in a country where such things are not known—I do mean to say that, when the proper

time comes for me to interfere, I have no doubt that my brother-in-law will pay me more respect than you have ever done, and that he will place a proper value upon my judgment. For, I say to myself, To whom does my brother-in-law's money belong? Clearly, not to himself. If he had a family of his own, it would belong to them. But he has no family of his own, and, therefore, it belongs to us, as the next of kin. Is not that the proper phrase, Nicholas? Marian shall not be in a hurry to marry. With her prospects, she may pick and choose from the highest in the land. Ah! If I had had such prospects when I was a girl—— You have no occasion to kick me, Nicholas; I will not submit to such conduct, sir!"

"I didn't kick you," said Nicholas: "I only turned round."

"Another sign of good manners! Turn round, indeed! But you shall not put me out of temper to-night, Nicholas. I shall go to sleep with the happy consciousness that I have done my duty to my family, and that, by my efforts, they are at length provided for."

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. NICHOLAS NUTTALL RECEIVES VISITORS.

HAVING completely made up her mind as to her right of possession, Mrs. Nicholas Nuttall conducted herself in a manner befitting her high position. Not only did it behove her to assert her superiority by means of silks and satins and grand airs, but it behoved her also to be practical. For she had settled it with herself that the property must be improved and looked after. Nicholas was certainly not fit to manage the Station: therefore she must manage it herself. There was no telling how soon she might be called upon to undertake the responsibility: her brother-in-law's constitution was evidently broken; already he was beginning to stoop, and he seemed to have grown a dozen years older in the few months she had known him. Then, he was so reckless—galloping about, here, there, and everywhere on wild horses; an accident so easily occurs! “I should never forgive myself,”

thought the estimable lady, "if anything were to happen—if his horse were to tumble over a fence for instance, or into a ditch, or the dear man were to be gored by a bull—I should never forgive myself if I were not in a position to manage the estate properly. To do this, I must obtain information." In pursuance of this resolution, she set about, with praiseworthy assiduity, obtaining information—as to when was the lambing season; as to the rate of increase; as to supposing you had twenty-thousand sheep this year how many would you be likely to have next; as to how much wool you could get off a sheep's back, and whether the poor things were not cold when they were sheared; as to the increase of oxen; as to the value of hides and tallow; as to the wild horses; and so on. Armed with little bits of information, she would lock herself in her bed-room, and make calculations, the usual result of which was that the property had been dreadfully mismanaged, and that when her brother-in-law broke his collar-bone, poor fellow! or was found gored to death by mad bulls, or "went off" in some other way—there were so many dreadful chances to contemplate!—Nicholas, under her management, should become a millionaire in a very short time. Thus it

came about that Nicholas found in the drawers scraps of paper covered with figures and strange remarks in his wife's handwriting, as thus: "Calculated at 100 per cent. increase, first year, 100,000 sheep; second year, 200,000; third year, 400,000; fourth year, 800,000; fifth year, 1,600,000; sixth year, 3,200,000; seventh year, 6,400,000; eighth year, 12,800,000—that will do—stop there—no, say another year—ninth year, 25,600,000—one year more, positively the last, because we shall be growing old—tenth year, 51,200,000—that will do! 51,200,000 sheep at £1 each, fifty one millions, two hundred thousand pounds: ask Nicholas how much a year that would be in the funds." And in the night, Mrs. Nuttall would keep poor Nicholas awake with questions about interest, and puzzling sums in multiplication and division. She was satisfied that she understood everything, and was mastering everything, but the land question. That bothered her dreadfully. She drove Nicholas almost crazy about it; the land question, she read in the newspapers, vitally affected the squatters. Therefore, as a future squatter-ess, it was of vital interest to her. At length, one night, she settled the question.

"And who is it that is kicking up all this

bother?" she asked. "There's somebody at the bottom of it, of course. Tell me immediately who it is." She made this demand in a tone which implied that she was prepared to wither them, directly they were made known to her.

"It's the people," said Nicholas.

"Oh! The people!" she exclaimed, sarcastically.

"And pray what do they want?"

"They want to unlock the lands," murmured Nicholas.

"Unlock the lands!" she exclaimed. "Never! While we have the key—we *have* got it, I suppose, somewhere—and while I have a voice in the matter, they shall never be unlocked. A nice thing, indeed!"

Then she dismissed the matter from her mind, and fell-to calculating again.

One day the worthy lady was taking her afternoon walk, with a green silk bonnet upon her head, and a white silk parasol in her hand—which articles of feminine vanity, be it observed, were the objects of much admiration and envy on the part of a Native, known as Old Man Tommy, who, basking in the sun, was feasting his eyes upon them. Old Man Tommy was an institution on Highlay Station. He was tolerated because he was harm-

less and old, and because when he was drunk he told stories of distant places, where he could find gold in "big bits;" indeed, he often brought to a neighbouring store small nuggets of gold, averaging a few penny-weights, which he exchanged for rum. When he was in his drunken humours the men about the Station would try to extract from the old man some information as to the exact locality of his gold region; but the Native was too cunning for them. All they could obtain from him was a comprehensive waving of his arms northwards, and the words: "There! Plenty gold! Big lumps! Me King Tommy! All mine!" On this afternoon he lay, sober for a wonder, looking admiringly at Mrs. Nuttall's bonnet and parasol. She was not at all offended at his admiration. It is surprising how lenient we can be to the defects or failings of those who minister to our vanity! In Mrs. Nuttall's eyes, the savage was a very shrewd and estimable person, and she strolled by him two or three times, as if unconscious of him, but really to reward him for his good taste. While she was thus occupied, Marian ran up to her, almost breathless, and cried,—

"Oh, mamma! such a dreadful thing has happened! A stockman's wife has lost three children—such dear children! We noticed them yesterday,

you know. The men have been out all night looking for them, but have not found them. The poor woman is in such a dreadful way! She says they have lost themselves in the bush, and will starve to death. And I have got a message for you, and one for Old Man Tommy——”

“Me, Old Man Tommy,” said the Native, rising, and throwing his dirty blanket over his shoulders.

The girl started back, half frightened.

“You no frightened Old Man Tommy!” he said.

“What you want?”

“You go—find children—lost in bush; you go—join them.” And Marian pointed to a little knot of men in the distance.

“Ah!” grunted Old Man Tommy. “Piccaninny lost in bush. Me go find him.” And he was walking away, when artful cupidity caused him to turn back.

“You give Old Man Tommy white money, him find piccaninny!”

“Oh, mamma!” exclaimed Marian, “give him some money. He will be sure to track them! Uncle said so.”

“I’m sure I shall do nothing of the sort,” said Mrs. Nuttall, indignantly. “Give money to a savage, indeed!”

"Me take hat," said Old Man Tommy, looking covetously at Mrs. Nuttall's green silk bonnet. Mrs. Nuttall started back.

"There, mamma!" cried Marian. "If you don't give him money, he will take your new bonnet."

Old Man Tommy's eyes twinkled, for he understood every word that was said. Mrs. Nuttall, to preserve her bonnet, took out her purse, and extracted a shilling.

"There, bad man!" she said, dropping the coin into his skinny palm. "Now, you go."

Old Man Tommy grinned, and with a leap, he raced off at full speed.

"He is a disgrace to the station," said Mrs. Nuttall, her opinion of the savage being entirely altered, "and when we come into possession——"

"We come into possession, mamma!"

"Yes, my dear. We are your uncle's only relatives, and of course, shall come into the property. When we come into possession, that savage, whose personal appearance is positively indecent, shall not be allowed to remain here a day."

"I am glad he is gone with them," said Marian. "All the men on the Station have joined in the search, and I heard one of them say that Old Man Tommy could smell foot-steps——"

"All he is fit for!" exclaimed Mrs. Nuttall.

"And would be certain to discover the tracks of the poor children. And they think Little Peter is lost as well, for they cannot find him anywhere. Uncle's gone, and papa, too."

"Mercy on me! Your papa gone! What does he know about the bush!"

"I don't know, mamma. He and uncle kissed me, and told me to tell you not to be frightened——"

"Frightened! at what, I should like to know?"

"As, perhaps, they would not come home until to-morrow."

"Good gracious, Marian! You don't mean to say that we shall be left alone all the night?"

"Yes, mamma, uncle said it was very likely; and we are to see that the windows and doors are locked. I hope we shall *not* be left alone, mamma; for if they come back, they will have found the dear children, and I shall be so pleased."

"Well," said Mrs. Nuttall, as they walked to the house, "how your papa, at his time of life, can go poking about in the bush all the night, after a pack of children, is beyond my comprehension! But he always was a mystery to me, Marian. When you marry, I hope you will get a

husband you can understand. Your father will come back with rheumatics, as sure as his name's Nicholas!"

There was, however, nothing for it but resignation, and Mrs. Nuttall made herself as comfortable as she could, under the circumstances. Excepting herself and Marian, there was nobody in the house but the cook, whose husband had also joined the search party.

"The natural anxiety of a wife," said Mrs. Nuttall, when the candles had been lighted, "entirely destroys any idea of sleep. Suppose we have a game of cribbage, Marian."

Now, it must be confessed that cribbage was a game of which Mrs. Nuttall was profoundly ignorant. She knew that there were so many cards to be dealt to each; that two cards were to be thrown out by each for crib; and that there was a board with holes in it, and pegs to stick into the holes. She had also (without knowing exactly how they were to be applied) certain vague notions of "fifteen two," and "one for his nob." Her knowledge of the mysteries of cribbage extended no further. And it was a proof of the wonderful confidence the little woman had in herself, that, in an off-hand way, she should suggest cribbage as a

means of passing the time, just as though she were mistress of the game.

They played for about an hour. It was nearly ten o'clock, and Mrs. Nuttall was growing fidgety.

"There!" she said, throwing up her cards; "I'll not play any more. You're so stupid, Marian, that you can't win a game. How *could* your papa be so foolish as to leave us alone! Oh, dear me! Don't you hear some one moving in the house?"

"No, mamma," said Marian. "You are getting quite nervous."

"Nervous, miss!" exclaimed Mrs. Nuttall, packing the cards. "I am surprised at you! Why, you are as bad as your papa! Me nervous, indeed! I should like——"

The sentence was not completed. The cards dropped from her hands, and she fell back, trembling, in her chair. For at the door stood the apparition of a man, his face covered with black crape. Marian screamed and rushed into her mother's arms, where she lay almost senseless from terror.

"Don't be frightened, ladies," said the apparition; "don't be frightened. Strike me petrified! but I'm as gentle as a dove, and wouldn't hurt a chicken! Only don't you scream again, or we'll

have to gag your pretty mouths. Come in, Jim ; the garrison's deserted."

At this invitation, another apparition, his face also covered with black crape, entered the room. Mrs. Nuttall's heart beat fast with fear, but she had courage enough to say,—

"Oh, please, good gentlemen——" when the second apparition interrupted her.

"None of that gammon. We're not good gentlemen—we're bushrangers. Is there anyone in the house besides yourselves?"

"No, sir," said the trembling woman, contradictorily; "only the cook."

"Where are all the men? Come—answer quickly."

As well as she was able, Mrs. Nuttall explained the cause of the men's absence.

"That's lucky for them," said Jim Pizey, "and lucky for us, too. Children lost, eh! Whose children?"

"A stockman's, sir, and Little Peter."

"Little Peter! What! a pale little sickly kid, with a white face and no flesh. Grif's Little Peter! How did he come here?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You do know!" exclaimed the Tender-

hearted Oysterman, fiercely. "And if you don't tell——"

How Mrs. Nuttall kept herself from swooning dead away was a mystery to her for ever afterwards. The Oysterman had laid his hand savagely upon her shoulder, when Marian interposed, and in a trembling voice told the story of Grif and Little Peter, and of how Grif had begged her uncle to take care of Little Peter, and would not come to Highlay Station himself because he had made a promise to a lady who had been kind to him.

"And didn't say who the lady was, eh?" asked the Tenderhearted Oysterman.

"No, sir."

"I wonder what the old bloke would have said if he had known that lady was his own daughter!" exclaimed the Oysterman.

As Mrs. Nicholas Nuttall heard this, and learnt for the first time that her brother-in-law had a daughter, all her dreams of future greatness faded away, and the fifty-one millions of sheep vanished into thin air. Notwithstanding her terror, she felt indignant that Mathew should dare to have a daughter (who would naturally come into the property), and not mention the fact to her.

"That's enough of that, Oysterman," said Jim

Pizey ; " we can't stop listening to women's yarns. We're safe enough for the next hour or two. We'll turn the place upside down in that time. Let there be a good watch kept outside. The first thing we'll do will be to have something to eat. Now, just you look here," he said, addressing Mrs. Nuttall, who betrayed symptoms of becoming hysterical ; " we ain't going to have any of your nonsense—none of your screaming, or anything of that sort. We won't hurt you, if you're quiet. Do you hear ? Get us something to eat—the best in the house—and some brandy. Make us a cup of tea, too. I should like to drink a cup of tea made by a lady."

That Mrs. Nuttall should come to this ! But she made the tea, and placed meat and bread upon the table, and waited upon the bushrangers, too, while they ate and drank.

The fancy entered their heads that they would have music with their meal, and they ordered Marian to play to them. When they had finished eating and drinking, the Tenderhearted Oysterman said,

" You shan't say you played for us for nothing. Here, put this round your neck." And he flung to her Little Peter's stone heart, which he had found in the bag of gold he had taken from the Welshman

after the murder. "Put it round your neck, I say," he cried, as the girl shrank into a corner, "or I'll do it for you!"

The trembling girl put the heart round her neck; and then Jim Pizey, jumping up, said,—

"Now, boys, no idling! To work—to work! Come, old woman, just show us over the house. Where's the old bloke's private room?"

But before Mrs. Nuttall could reply, a whistle was heard.

"Strike me dead!" cried the Oysterman. "That's Ralph's signal. The men are coming back." At that moment a shot was fired outside, and was followed by a scream of pain. "Look here!" he said, rapidly to the women; "if you stir from this spot, by the living Lord, I'll shoot you! Stay you here, and don't move, for your lives!"

More shots were heard; and, cursing fiercely, the bushrangers hurried from the room, locking the door upon the terrified women.

CHAPTER XII.

A NIGHT OF ADVENTURES.

ALICE and Grif were within a few miles of Highlay Station. That morning, Old Jamie, having brought them to the road that led to their journey's end, had bidden them good-bye and God speed! They had walked during the day, and they were now resting in a clump of bush. Alice was very pale and thin, while poor Grif was absolutely clothed with rags. He looked dusty and tired; as indeed he was, for he had consistently declined to avail himself of the waggoner's invitation to ride, and had walked the whole of the way. His feet were bare, and he was suffering from the first symptoms of an attack of slow Australian fever; his skin was hot and blazing, and his white tongue clung to the roof of his mouth, and almost choked him. But he did not complain. He had sworn to Alice that he would be faithful and true to her, and he would

keep his word. As they trudged along, side by side, that day, the devoted faithfulness of the lad sank deeper than it had ever yet done into Alice's mind. Much as she knew of his devotion and his suffering, much reason as she had to thank and bless him for the help he had given her, for the fealty he had shown to her, she did not know all. She did not know that the soles of his feet were one mass of blisters; she did not know that every time he put his feet to the ground and raised them again, burning pains quivered through him. But not a groan escaped him—he returned Alice's looks cheerfully and smilingly, and bore his agony without a murmur.

He had made a great impression upon the good-hearted waggoner. Old Jamie had received a hint from his friend the bullock-driver that Alice desired to keep her story to herself; he respected her wish, and did not distress her with questions. But he talked a great deal with Grif, and learned to his surprise that Grif and Alice were not in any way related, and that they had known each other for only a few months. He failed to detect any selfish motive for Grif's service to her, and he was a witness to the boy's heroic suffering. Ignorant as he was of their story, the strange companionship

was a puzzle beyond his comprehension. "You love her?" he once asked of Grif, receiving in reply an affirmative nod. "Why?" "Because she's good," Grif replied. "There never was nobody arf as good as Ally." That was the substance of all he was able to extract from Grif, and with that he was fain to be satisfied.

The night before they parted from Old Jamie, Alice could not sleep. The near approach of the end of her task rendered her restless, and she lay until past midnight on her soft bed of leaves, kept awake by anxious thought. Unable to bear the torture any longer, she rose and walked softly about the woods. The influence of the quiet night did her good, and she rested against a tree, with a more composed mind. She had not so rested for more than two or three minutes before a voice broke upon her ear. Nervous and worn as she was, she trembled with alarm, but only for a moment, for she recognised the voice as Grif's, and remembered that he was sleeping near the spot. She inclined her head, and listened. "You'll take care on him, sir," she heard him say. "I can't go—I can't leave *her*. I shan't like to part with Little Peter, but it'll be for his good. I ain't got any grub to give him, sir. Don't say no, sir! Take Little

Peter, and not me, and I'll do anythin'—anythin' but go away from where *she* is!" She knew, as she heard these words, muttered at intervals, that he referred to her when he said that he could not go away from where *she* was. "Good-bye, Little Peter; you'll never be hungry no more!" he sighed, and then Alice heard a sudden movement, as if he were sitting up. "I remember every word," he continued. "If ever you want me to do anythin'—never mind what it is, so long as I know I'm a doing of it for you—I'll do it, true and faithful, I will, so 'elp me G—! And I *will*; I'm her friend—that's what I am—I'm her friend, till I die! She said so herself." Alarmed at the earnestness of his voice, Alice stole towards Grif's sleeping-place. As her eyes rested upon him, he sank down, and buried his face in the earth. His arms were stretched over his head; she laid her soft fingers upon his hard hand, and felt that it was burning. Presently he spoke again, but did not move his face. "He swore he'd kill Rough, and he's done it. But I'll be even with him one of these days! Little Peter! Rough's dead. Ain't you sorry?" He waited as if for an answer. "The Tenderhearted Oysterman's pizened him. Say, Damn him!" He waited again for an

answer, and then he said, "That's right. Now, come, and bury him." A long pause ensued—a pause occupied, in the boy's fancy, by a walk on a dismal, rainy night, through miserable streets, towards a burial-ground. "Ashes to ashes!" he murmured. "Good-bye, Rough. Dear old Rough! Poor old Rough!" And with the last remembrance of his faithful dumb companion lingering in his mind, Grif's sleep became more peaceful, and he did not speak again. Alice sat by his side for an hour and more, and then retired to her bed, filled with a tender compassion.

The next morning Old Jamie bade them good-bye, and shook Grif's hand heartily. During the day Alice had been much occupied thinking over Grif's feverish mutterings the previous night, and now, as they sat together near to her father's homestead, near, perhaps, to lasting misery or lasting happiness, she noticed Grif's burning skin and the brilliancy of his eyes.

"I have overtaxed you, my poor Grif," she said. "How tired you must be!"

"I'm all right, Ally," said the boy. "Never you mind me. So long as you are in time to do what you want, and can see your father, I don't care a bit."

"We are not far off. And now that we are so near, I am full of fears. Yet I should not be so, for Heaven has surely watched over us. What good friends we have met upon the way! How thankful I am! God bless the good men who helped us on the road!"

"Yes," said Grif, reflectively; "they was very good coves, they was. I'm thinkin', Ally, that a good deal of what the preacher chap said to me was right. Not all of it, you know, but some. He told me, when I was in quod, that men was charitable and good; and they must be, a good many on 'em. Look at them two coves, the bullock-driver and the wagginer. They'd got no call to help us. It didn't do 'em a bit of good, as I sees, for they didn't get nothin' out of us. Then there's this blanket the wagginer give us. I never got no one to give me a blanket before."

And Grif rested his aching head in the palm of his hand, and mused over this exceptional circumstance in his career. Alice noticed the action, and noticed also that it was prompted partly by physical suffering.

"You are in pain!" Alice cried, anxiously, as Grif, with difficulty, repressed a groan.

"Don't you bother about me," Grif said, stoutly.

"I've got a little bit of a headache, that's all. I'll be all right in a minute."

"I am afraid you have a touch of fever," Alice said, "and I cannot help you now. By-and-by, when my task is done, I may be able to nurse you. If all goes well——"

"It *shall* go well, Ally," Grif said, dreamily. "It shall go well—you'll be all right, Ally, you will—you see if you won't!"

"If all goes well, Grif, I shall be able to nurse you; for to-morrow, please God! we shall be at rest."

"Yes—to-morrow, please God! we shall be at rest," Grif repeated softly.

"I knew last night that you were ill," she said.

"How?" he asked. "I didn't say anythin', did I?"

"Not when you were awake."

He looked at her, not comprehending her meaning.

"I was sitting by you when you were asleep, Grif."

A sudden moisture came into his eyes, and he repeated her words in a broken voice. "You sat by me when I was asleep! For how long, Ally?"

"For an hour, nearly, Grif."

He touched the skirt of her dress with his hand, without her observing him, and placed his fingers to his lips.

"And you were talking of a great many things I did not understand. I knew you were not well by the way you were talking in your sleep. Is Little Peter one of your friends? I heard you speak of him."

"I spoke of Little Peter, did I, Ally? Perhaps I shall see him to-morrow. I wonder if he'll remember me, and be glad to see me!"

Alice thought he was wandering in his mind, and she took his hand in hers.

"I ought to have told you before, Ally," Grif continued. "I know your father; I've seed him three times. Once, that night you gave me the letter, by the sea, you know; twice, when Mr. Blemish set me up as a moral shoe-black" (a sharp pang darted through him as he remembered that he had broken the pledge of honesty he had given to Alice); "three times, when he came upon me and Little Peter when we was sittin' under a hedge. He was very kind that time to me, Ally. He wanted me and Little Peter to go on to his Station, but I said I couldn't go, and asked him to take

Little Peter alone. And he did—as much to please the lady as anythin' else.”

“The lady!” Alice echoed.

“There was a lady with him, a young lady. She called him uncle. And they took Little Peter away with them, and I’ve never seen him since.”

So, little by little, he told the whole story; how he had always felt as if Little Peter were his brother; how he used to steal for him when he was hungry: how, when he turned honest, Little Peter often had nothing to eat; and how sorry he was to part with Little Peter, and how glad to know that the lad would never be hungry any more. Grif cried as he spoke, and the pain in his heart was greater than the pain in his body.

“You did not speak to my father about me, Grif—you did not mention me in any way?”

“’Tain’t likely, Ally. If he’d a’ known that you and a poor beggar like me was friends, it wouldn’t have done you much good. He knows pretty well what sort of life I’ve led.”

“There are good and bad in the world, dear Grif. It is not your fault that your life has not been cast in pleasant places, nor amongst good people.”

“They’re a bad lot I’ve been amongst. That’s the reason I’m so bad, I s’pose.”

"Ah, dear Grif," said Alice tenderly; "if all were like you——"

"They'd be precious queer, Ally, if they was all like me. It's a good job for them that isn't! I oughtn't to have been born, that's where it is! I wish I never had been. I wouldn't if I could have helped it."

"Hush! you must not speak like that."

"I can't help it, Ally," said the boy fretfully. "If they'd come to me and said, 'Now, will you be born or not?' I should have said, 'No, I won't!'"

"It is by God's will that we are here," said Alice, with tearful eyes. "There is a better world than this."

"Is there, Ally?" asked Grif, eagerly. "Is there? The preacher cove said there was, but I didn't believe him, he spoke so hard-like. It didn't sound good the way he said it. It set me agin it."

"Yes, dear Grif, another world where sin and sorrow are not known."

"I wouldn't mind goin' there," said Grif, musingly, "if it's all right. I'd rather be out of it, though, if it's like this one—that is, unless I was a swell. I wonder if my dawg Rough's there! I should like

to see old Rough agin. But lord! I don't expect they'd have me among 'em. I'm a regular bad 'un, I am!"

"There is One above us, my dear," said Alice, resting her hand lightly on the boy's shoulder, "who knows your heart, and will reward you for your goodness. If you have erred, it is through no fault of yours."

"Not as I knows on. I never bothered about nothin' else but my grub. I'm not so bad as Jim Pizey or the Tenderhearted Oysterman. He's a orfie bad 'un, is the Oysterman—ten times worse nor me! He'd steal a sixpence out of a blind man's tray!"

"I pray that our journey may end happily," said Alice, "for your sake as well as mine. You are my brother, now and always. I am so tired, Grif, that I must rest for a couple of hours; then we will go on to my father's house."

"All right, Ally. I'll watch, and call you."

And spreading the blanket over Alice, Grif retired a short distance, and lay down. He meant to keep awake, but he was overpowered by fatigue, and presently he dozed off, and then slept soundly.

What was this creeping stealthily through the

bush? The form of a man, with haggard, almost despairing face; with beating heart, with hands that trembled with a convulsive agony. The form of Richard Handfield!

He had escaped from his vile associates. Strict as was the watch they had kept upon him, he had eluded them; he had made no idle efforts to escape; he had bided his time, and he was free. But of what use was his freedom to him? He had joined them for the settled purpose of obtaining some information, some evidence, that would render clear his innocence of the horrible charge which he knew men and the law were bringing against him. If he could have done that, he would have been contented. But he had not been able to obtain the slightest evidence to assist him; and hope, for a time, entirely deserted him, when he discovered that they all knew that the Oysterman himself had done the deed, and had laid the trap to catch him. Richard, for the sake of his own personal safety, was compelled to join in admiration of the devilish cunning which had thrown the suspicion of guilt upon himself. He had unconsciously strengthened the spring of the trap in which he had been caught; for, say the entire gang were taken, would not their vindic-

tiveness lead them to bear false evidence against him? What else could he expect from such as they? They all hated him, they all suspected him; and he knew that they only admitted him as a comrade because of his intimate knowledge of Highlay Station, and of the house in which was concealed the purchase-money of the property which Mathew Nuttall coveted. That obtained, they would not care what became of him; nor did he, either, but for one consideration, care what became of himself. But for that one consideration, he would have bidden good-bye to life—he would have had courage for that, coward as he was—and would have allowed the waters of pitiless circumstance to have engulfed him for ever. That consideration was Alice. That she, knowing his weak, vacillating nature, should be led to believe from his silence that he was guilty, was the worst torture of all to him. He wanted to see her, to assure her of his innocence; then, let come what might, he would meet it with some sort of weak fortitude at all events. And he would save Alice's father if he could; he would do that one right deed for Alice's sake. So, matching his cunning with theirs, he had escaped from the villains that day; and now he was making his

way to a hut, where he knew two stockmen dwelt, to give the alarm. He had not eaten food since the morning; he had a few shillings in his pocket, but he had not dared to diverge from his course to purchase bread. He halted for a moment, faint and weary, his heart racked with a terrible despair. He had brought it all on himself, he knew, by his unmanliness. Who was he that he should pass his time in repining as he had done? What better man was he than other men, that he should expect life to be made especially smooth for him? But he had expected this, and had wrecked his happiness by murmuring at the fancied hardships by which he had been afflicted. He thought of Alice waiting in Melbourne—waiting and hoping in vain—but still loving him, still believing in him. “I am unworthy of her,” he groaned; “and have been from the first, utterly unworthy. No man ever had such a blessing as she would have been to me, if I had not been mad. Oh, bright Heaven!” he cried; “place it in my power to see her, and tell her of my innocence before I die!” He crept on in the direction of the stockmen’s hut. At every step he took he halted, his heart in his ears; for he knew well that if he were caught by the gang,

life was over with him. He was thoroughly acquainted with the locality. "They may lose some time hunting for me," he thought; "and I may gain a few minutes by that means." The moments were too precious to waste in repining. He had a purpose to accomplish—to fail in its accomplishment would be worse than death. And a moment might win it or mar it. Life had never before been so bitter and so sweet to him as it was at this time: bitter in the irrevocable past, with its load of shame and humiliation; sweet in the possible future in the thought that he might save the woman who had sacrificed all for him from the agony of believing him guilty. He dashed the bitter tears from his eyes, and crept along. But a few yards—for he saw a human form upon the ground. Who could it be? He crept onwards, and bending over it—Great Heavens! Was he dreaming, or was it a phantasm of Death? The earth and sky, blended together, swam in his fading sight. Then, he saw nothing but the white face of his wife, and he sank down beside it. He lost consciousness for a few moments, and when he recovered, he rose and looked about him with the air of one waking from a bewildering dream. Hush! she was speaking in her sleep. He knelt by her side, and

listened. He heard his name and her father's mingled strangely together. He heard her entreat him not to—Horror!—was it Murder of which she spoke? He seized her by the arm, and cried, "Alice! Alice! awake!" With a scream of terror she awoke, and seeing her husband before her, she called him by the dearest of names, and blessing God for bringing him to her, she fell upon his breast weeping. For a brief space only did she allow herself such happiness. The full memory of her mission rushed upon her, and she extricated herself from his arms, and asked, "Oh, Richard, answer me quickly—am I too late?"

Too late for what? He did not speak the words, but she saw them expressed in his face. She saw, accompanying them, a look of such terrible despair, that her senses would have left her if her strong purpose had not upheld her.

"Tell me,—quickly, or I shall die," she said in a voice which, although it was no louder than a whisper, sounded on his ears like a knell; "am I too late?"

"Too late for what?" he was constrained to ask.

"To save my father!"

A sigh of exquisite relief escaped him. He

thought it was of another danger she was about to speak. The change of expression in his countenance was a sufficient answer, and for a few brief moments she was silent, almost overcome with grateful thought.

"I am bewildered," Richard said, pressing his hands across his face. "What brought you here?"

"I came to save my father—to save you."

"Then you know"——

"All."

"All!" echoed Richard, shrinking from her.

"Do not shrink from me, dear," she said. "Yes, I know all about my father's danger and yours. Do not look upon me so strangely, Richard. Is it not happiness that we have met before any evil is done? Be thankful for his sake, for yours, for mine."

He did not reply, but he came closer to her, and then she told him rapidly what had occurred to her since he left Melbourne. In as few words as she could relate the story, she told him of Milly's death, of the letter the poor girl had given her, and of the horror which possessed her when she read of the plot Jim Pizey and his comrades had laid to trap her husband——

Richard stopped her there. "Anything about a

murder?" he asked. No, she answered; only mention of the circumstance that they had set a trap for him and had caught him.

That gleam of hope vanished as soon as it had shone upon his troubled soul. He pressed his hand to his heart, and motioned her to proceed.

She told him how she and Grif had started to walk from Melbourne half-an-hour after poor Milly died—every word she uttered of this part of her story struck him as if it were a dagger's point; she told him of Grif's goodness to her—(the lad had awoken, and was standing by them, listening to Alice with rapt attention, and when she mentioned his name she took his hand and kissed it); of the kind friends they had met upon the road; of their walking a long distance that day, and of their stopping providentially to rest for a while before proceeding to her father's house; all this she told him almost breathlessly. But he saw what she made no mention of; he saw in her care-worn face the anxiety and grief she had suffered for him—he saw in her patient, uncomplaining eyes, the perfect purity of her love—he saw in her soiled and ragged clothes the wondrous evidence of a holy self-sacrifice—and he fell upon his knees, and, burying his face in her dress, he sobbed like a little child.

"Oh, my dear! my dear!" he cried. "How unworthy I am of your love!"

"Not unworthy, Richard," she said happy in the thought that his nature was not hardened; "unfortunate, not unworthy. We have gone through terrible storms, dear, but they will pass away presently. Surely we have suffered enough!" But there was no sound of complaining in her voice as she raised her streaming eyes to heaven.

He kept his face buried in her dress, and the memory of their last parting, when he knelt before her as he was kneeling before her now, and when she blessed him with her hands upon his head, came to his mind. How low had he fallen since that time!

"There is a more terrible storm for you to bear than any you have yet borne," he said. "There is a greater peril before us than any we have yet encountered."

Her face was hidden from him, but he held her hand in his, and it suddenly turned cold. Her fingers tightened upon his, and she asked, "What is it? What storm? What peril?"

"I had a mate, a Welshman, a man with a soul as innocent as a child's—with a heart as tender as a woman's. I was growing to love him. I had another mate, a villain, who stepped between us

and told to each of us such lying stories of the other, that we quarrelled, and almost fought. All the gold-diggers knew that we were at enmity with each other. They all knew that if there were any true cause for our quarrel, poor Tom would be found to be in the right, I in the wrong. They knew him to be good and gentle-hearted. They knew me to be proud and selfish. They loved him. They despised me. We lived in a tent together, and slept beneath the same roof. One night I came home, filled with bitter feelings, which I had been expressing in company. I was stung almost to madness by what my villain-mate told me Tom had said of me. I never stopped to think, I never stopped to ask, but I let my passion have full sway. When I came home, determined to quarrel, pledged to do so, proud fool as I am! because I had said as much out-of-doors—Tom met my passion with sweetness, and forced me to talk of the cause of our falling-out. Then we discovered that our false mate had been lying to both of us, to make us enemies for some purpose of his own, which I did not know then, but know now. We shook hands, and were friends again; we laid out plans for the future—for your happiness and mine chiefly, for Tom taught me my duty that night. We went

to bed, and in the morning Tom was found dead, murdered with my knife! That and the other awful evidence of my own ungovernable passion were against me, and I was obliged, or thought I was obliged, to fly for my life; the gold-diggers swore they would lynch me if they caught me. So I fled in the company of the villains from whom I have but this day escaped. The false mate who set Tom and me quarrelling was the Tenderhearted Oysterman, disguised so that I could not recognise him—and the murder of the Welshman with my knife was the means they took of compelling me to join them. I escaped from them to-day—to warn your father and save him, if possible. That is why I am here. After that I do not know what will become of me. As I hope for mercy, I have told you the truth!”

When he had spoken the words: “Tom was found dead, murdered with my knife,” Richard, whose face was still half-hidden in his wife’s dress, felt her limbs tremble, although no sound escaped her. At that sign, he rose abruptly, and he spoke the last words of his confession, “As I hope for mercy, I have told you the truth!” with his back turned to her. The moment’s pause that ensued seemed to him an hour; the stars paled out of the

skies, and a thick darkness fell upon him and shut out the sight of everything but his own deep misery; then a great tremor of happiness came upon him, for he felt his wife's arms about his neck and heard her voice whispering in his ear: "I know you have, my love. Did you think I could believe you otherwise than unfortunate? More now than ever must we be brave, must we be firm; not only life and happiness, but honour is at stake. Courage, love! courage! Think! Is there no way to prove your innocence of this dreadful charge? The letter I have is something."

"It is something," he said; "but oh Alice, my dear, in the harsh judgments of men, with all-cruel circumstance against me, it will be but poor testimony in my favour. All the gang know he committed the crime. If I had a witness, one who had heard the villain confess, as he confessed to me, laughing the while, that he stole my knife, and with it did the deed, for the purpose of trapping me—if I had such a witness, my innocence would be established. Oh, Alice, if I had such a witness—for your sake, my love! my darling! whom I have surrounded with shame and misery——"

"Hush! my dear! Heaven will send such a witness! I know it! I feel it!"

"I scarcely dare hope it," he said; "it is known to none but to the four men in the gang. And they will not tell, for their own sakes."

"I will appeal to them—implore them. I have a message to the man Pizey from poor Milly. I will see him, and beg of him, for her sake, to clear you from the charge."

"You do not know them; pity never enters their hearts. There are four of them: Jim Pizey, the Tenderhearted Oysterman, Ned Rutt, as cold-blooded a villain as ever stepped, and Grif's father."

Richard said this last in a whisper, so that Grif should not hear. He looked at the lad, who was still standing by them in an attentive attitude.

"Is he with them?" asked Alice, with a pitying glance to Grif, who was now turning slowly away.

"Yes, and as bad as the rest. But Alice, we have tarried too long already. We must not waste another minute."

"Yes, we must go," Alice said, preparing to move. "You know the way, Richard. Take comfort, dear! All will turn out well—I feel it will. Where's Grif?"

Grif was gone. They called him, and searched for him in vain. They could find no trace of him.

"He was here but a moment ago!" Alice said,

much distressed. "Perhaps he thinks you are not pleased to find me with him. He is keenly sensitive."

"And I have spoken unkindly to him, and he remembers it," said Richard, to whom every memory of the past brought with it a sting of self-reproach. "If I can make it up to him, I will. He will find us, I have no doubt. We dare not linger now, Alice. The stockmen's hut is in the hollow. We must go there at once, and give the alarm. Come—there may be death to your father in every moment's delay!"

Keenly anxious as Alice was because of Grif's unaccountable disappearance, she felt how precious was time for the safety of her father: his life might depend upon their speed. They moved carefully away from the track, and walked through the bush as quickly as possible.

"There are few except myself who would be able to find their way here," said Richard. "But you remember, Alice, I was always fond of roaming about the Station. You would scarcely believe how near to this spot is your father's house. It is only two miles, as the crow flies—I could walk straight to it, in less than half-an-hour. Hark! We are disturbing the crows! I used to call this Crow's

Hollow. See, we are in a hollow, completely hidden by the ranges and the thick timber. It is a melancholy-looking place."

It was in truth a dismal spot, and Alice shuddered as she heard the harsh cawing of the birds. Suddenly she stopped.

"Richard," she said, "do you hear nothing?"

He listened, and shook his head.

"Nothing but the crows," he said.

"It's not a crow, Richard. Listen again. Can I be mistaken? A child's voice, singing!"

And hurrying swiftly in the direction of the sound, they came upon a strange sight. Two boy-children were lying, as if dead, upon the ground, clasped in each other's arms, and one, a little girl, was covering them with her frock, which she had taken off for that purpose. She was the eldest of the three, and yet could scarcely be eight years of age. She was singing softly a child's ditty. A few yards from her was a pale-faced boy, looking vacantly before him. It was Little Peter, who with the other three children had been wandering in the bush for two days. They had set out for a long walk on the first day, taking two or three slices of bread and butter with them, and had lost their way. When the night came, they were near a cavern, the mouth of which

was nearly choked up with stones and rotten under-wood. They peeped through the crevices, and as it looked like a house inside, they crept in, and tried to go to sleep. But they had not been long in the cave before they heard a great flapping, and something rushed by, sending a cold wind to their faces. They were nearly frightened out of their lives, but they did not dare to move; every other minute came the flapping and cold wind. They thought the place was haunted, and they shut their eyes tight, and pressed their fingers in their ears, and lay trembling with their faces touching each other; they found much comfort in that! The bravest of the party was the little girl, sister to Johnny and Billy. These three were the Stockman's children. The girl, although she was mortally afraid, kept her fears to herself, and sang little songs to her companions during the whole night. And so they lay, with their faces touching each other, until the morning came. For a good many minutes they were frightened to look around, but when they did muster up courage, they found that there were a great number of bats inside the cavern, and that it was the flapping of their wings that had frightened them so. The floor of the cavern was strewn with the bones and dried-up skins of bats. The children were glad to get out into the

bright light, and they washed their faces and dried them on the little girl's frock. Then they began to feel hungry, but all their bread and butter was eaten. They did not know where they were, and they wandered about the whole of the day, crying, and growing more and more faint, until night came again; they would not go into the cavern to sleep, so the girl had made her two brothers a bed of leaves, and was trying to sing them to sleep, when Alice and Richard discovered them. The child stopped in the middle of her song, and running to Alice, with a cry of joy, said,—

“If you please we have been lost in the bush, and Johnny and Billy, and Little Peter, and me, we’ve had nothing to eat, and we’re so hungry! Please take us home!” The children clustered around her, and she was stooping to kiss them, when a groan from Richard caused her to look up.

“Alice!” he cried, seizing her arm with such force as to cause her pain. “See! We are discovered!”

Lights were moving in the bush, and the voices of men, calling to each other, were heard.

“It is Jim Pizey and the rest, looking for me,” he whispered, hoarsely, and trembling with fear—for her, not for himself. “If they find us, it is all over

with us. They swore to kill me, if I attempted to escape; and you—— Oh, Alice! say that you forgive me for the peril to which I have exposed you!”

“I do forgive you, Richard!” Alice said, kissing him. “Have you any weapon?”

He produced a revolver, loaded.

“Is it useless trying to escape?” she asked.

“Quite. See—they are spreading themselves out. We are lost. They have no pity, those men. Oh my God!” he cried, in an anguish. “This is worse than all!”


“If those men be the men you fear, Richard,” said Alice, rapidly, her limbs trembling, and a nameless horror resting in her eyes, “swear that you will kill me! Swear it, as you hope for mercy—as you hope to meet me in heaven, when all our misery is ended!”

“I swear it, Alice!”

“My poor husband!—my dear love!” and she pressed him to her breast. “Forgive us, O Lord, for what we are about to do!”

They stood hand in hand, their faces as the faces of the dead; while the children, clinging to Alice’s dress, looked up at her in wondering fear.

Nearer and nearer came the lights, and louder grew the voices of the men.



"Here is a shoe!" one called out. "The children are somewhere near. We're on their track."

"It is my father's voice!" cried Alice, as the sound reached her ears. "Richard, we are saved! They are searching for the children we have found! Do you hear? We are saved! Father! this way! this way!"

But the last words died in her throat, and staggering forward, she fell into the arms of her father, who had hurried to the spot as she cried. He recognised his daughter, and a fear smote him, as she lay motionless in his arms, that she was dead. The remorse which fell upon him overcame his surprise at her appearance, and even made him look upon Richard without astonishment.

"She has fainted from fatigue, sir," said Richard; "she has been sorely tried."

"Why is she here?" asked Matthew Nuttall.

"She came from Melbourne, sir, to warn you of danger which threatens you, and to save me from disgrace; but for this latter, I fear she is too late. Your house, at this moment, is surrounded by bushrangers."

"Bushrangers!" cried Matthew Nuttall; "and there are only two women in the house!"

"We are stronger than the bushrangers," said Richard. "There are but four in their party. We

have no time to lose. We must make for the place without delay. See, sir! Your daughter is recovering."

She opened her eyes, and looked wildly round. Seeing her father, her memory returned; and she slid from his arms, and falling upon her knees at his feet, she said, imploringly,—

"Forgive me, father!"

The sound of the soft lapping of the sea upon the sands fell upon his ears, but now there was a sweet music in the sound; and in the vision of white crested waves which came upon him again, the stars were shining in the blue depths with a glad light. Chastened and subdued, he raised his daughter to his breast and kissed her. The tears that welled into his eyes were tears of purification. His hard nature was softened by the perfect goodness of the pure and faithful woman! He held out his hand to Richard, who took it, and said—

"We dare not linger, sir. The bushrangers may be there before us."

"True!" replied Matthew Nuttall. "Keep a good look-out, men, and follow me. We'll take these villains, dead or alive! See to your pistols. Alice, keep behind with the children. Now then, On!"

CHAPTER XIII.

GRIF BEARS FALSE WITNESS.

WHEN Grif had fallen asleep an hour ago, overcome by fatigue, the fever which had made him shiver to his marrow seemed to have left him. Alice's words: "You are my brother, now and always," were like balm to his aching body, and caused him to forget his pain. "Her brother now and always!" he murmured to himself again and again, and sleep overtook him with a smile upon his lips. When he awoke he was not surprised to see Richard standing by Alice's side. It was a fitting continuation of the fancies that had been busy in his brain while he was dozing—fancies which took no defined mental shape, but pointed to a happy termination of Alice's troubles. So, he had stood quietly by the side of Alice and her husband, listening attentively to Richard's story, and taking no credit to himself for the part he had played in bringing husband and wife to each other's arms.

As Richard spoke of Poor Welsh Tom, Grif thought, "I should like to know him; he's the right sort, he is," and when the despairing man came to the Welshman's murder, Grif felt as if he had lost a friend. It would be difficult to analyse the sensations that crowded upon Grif's mind as Richard proceeded with his story. All his pain came back to him intensified by the misery he felt was in store for Alice, unless her husband's innocence were established. Misery, not happiness, would be her portion if this were not accomplished. It must be done. But how! There were two reasons why it must be done—one infinitely less strong than the other, but having its weight nevertheless in the light of Grif's untrained intellect. The stronger reason was Alice's welfare; all considerations, but one, sank into utter insignificance, when her happiness was in question. The weaker reason sprang from his implacable hatred to the Tenderhearted Oysterman. And now the two dominant feelings which possessed him—the earnest desire to benefit Alice, and the intense desire to revenge himself upon the Tenderhearted Oysterman—seemed in some dim way to be connected. The very accomplishment of his desire to serve Alice must spring from the accomplishment of his desire

to be revenged upon his enemy. That end he saw ; but how about the means ?

All this passed through Grif's mind while Richard was telling his story. The story being told, a despairing conviction stole upon Grif that Richard was lost, and with him, Alice. There was no way to prove Richard's innocence. As he thought this, he heard Richard's next words, "If I had a witness, one who heard the villain confess, as he confessed to me, laughing the while, that he stole my knife, and with it did the deed, for the purpose of trapping me—if I had such a witness, my innocence would be established." Then he heard Alice console her husband and say, "Heaven will send such a witness. I know it! I feel it!" As these words fell upon his ears, light dawned upon him, and a suddenly-formed, but fixed purpose, entered his mind. Watching his opportunity, he stole softly away—so softly that neither Alice nor Richard observed him. He heard Alice call to him, but he did not reply. He lingered for a little while, and was grateful to them for the trouble they took to find him. Alice was so close to him once that he was enabled to touch her ; and for the second time that night he touched her dress with his hand, and then raised his hand to his lips. He

kept it there for a few moments, thinking the while. "She wouldn't call me if she knew what I was goin' to do," he said. "Besides, she's got her husband now; she don't want me. What a artful trap they set to catch Dick Handfield! What oneners they are! But Grif 'll show 'em!" And he walked off towards Matthew Nuttall's house, talking and communing with himself as he went.

"She wants a witness," he said. "She's got her husband, and she'd be all right if she had a witness. It's not a bit of good her comin' all the way up here, if she don't get a witness. What did Dick Handfield say? If he had a witness who could swear that he heard the Oysterman confess to stealin' his knife and murderin' the poor cove with it, his innocence would be proved! Yes, that was what he said. If he don't get that witness, he'll be took up for murder, and somethin' dreadful 'll happen to Ally. And if his innocence is proved, Ally will be happy all her life. That'd be very good, that would. 'Eaven will send the witness, Ally said. No, it won't. For I'll be the witness! And 'Eaven don't send me! Not a bit of it! Only think of the Oysterman laughin' all the while he told how he murdered poor Tom!" (Grif lingered lovingly over the memory of Welsh Tom, as if they had

been friends.) "He's a rasper, is the Oysterman! But I'll be even with him. If I can get in with the gang—but they'd suspect me. I was moral when the Oysterman and Jim sor me in Melbourne—they won't b'lieve I ain't moral now. How shall I manage it? I've got to be very careful with 'em. They're up to pretty nearly every move. I've got it!" he cried, after pondering for a few moments. "I'll say I've been sent up by Old Flick, to tell 'em that Dick Handfield's going to peach upon 'em. They'll b'lieve that! Dick Handfield's runnin' away to-day 'll make 'em believe it. They won't be up to that dodge. And I'll tell Jim Pizey that Milly's dead, and that she made me promise to come and see him at once, and arks him to take care of the baby. That's a artful move, that is, and no mistake! He liked Milly, did Jim, and he'll be sorry to hear she's dead." (Grif laughed and hugged himself as he thought of his scheme.) "And father's in the gang, too. I heard Dick tell Ally that; though he said it in a whisper, and didn't want me to hear. I ain't seen father since he shied that bottle at my head for stealin' pies. He said I'd disgraced him, and that he never was in quod for stealin' pies. He wouldn't mind if I'd been in quod for somethin' worse. I know what

I'll do. I'll tell him I'm a regular plucky 'un, a regular bad 'un, up to anythin', and I'll get him to tell me all about the Oysterman's plot. Then I'll go and be a witness. Lord!" he mused, "what a queer move it is! They'll kill me when they find it out, but I don't care. It'll make Ally happy, and she'll like me all the better. Then there's the Oysterman! I'll cry quits with him, now, for pizenin' Rough! Won't he be savage!"

But any pleasure he might have derived from this last reflection was soon lost in the contemplation of his fixed purpose to serve Alice. Grif's love for her amounted almost to worship. When he told her that he would die for her, he meant, actually, that he would be glad to die, if, by his death, he could serve her. Born and reared in the midst of thieves and ruffians, no softening influence had fallen upon him until he had met Alice. She had been kind and gentle to him, who had never before received kind or gentle treatment. Accustomed from his birth to the association of men in whom brutality and selfishness were predominant, the picture of Alice's unselfish devotion caused him to reflect. It awoke the good principle within him, and she became at once his standard of perfection. When she gave him her friendship, he felt that he

was unworthy of it. Could he make himself worthy of it? No, he was sure he could not; he was so different to her, or, rather, she was so different to every one else. He was surrounded with evil associations, and he could not disentangle himself from them. Only once had he made an attempt to free himself, and that he did rather to please Alice than in the belief that he would be successful. Well, he had tried to be honest, and he had almost starved; he would have starved if he had persevered in his moral career—that he had settled satisfactorily with himself. It was clearly evident that honesty was not for such as he. It was not his fault that he had been born; it was not his fault that he was what he was; yet the world punished him for it. But Alice had pitied him because of his unfortunate position, and her sympathy fell upon his heart, like rain upon parched land. To the world, for its harshness, he returned defiance; to Alice, for her tenderness, he gave all he had to give of love.

“I wonder if they’re at the house,” Grif said, as he walked along. “If they are, I hope they won’t hurt no one. He’s a wicked devil, is Jim Pizey, though, and he’ll be mad at Dick’s runnin’ away from ’em.”

Soon he came to a fence, and, three or four hundred

yards before him, he saw the Home Station. A fine house, built of stone, with a broad verandah in front, and surrounded with garden-grounds in beautiful order. Grif crept slowly along by the side of the fence, in the direction of the house.

"I can see lights movin' about," he muttered. "There's a man outside, walkin' up and down. He's got a gun in his hand, too. Yes, they're there, and he's keepin' watch. Everythin's very quiet."

By this time, Grif was within twenty yards of the house. He halted for a minute or two; he had crept very cautiously and carefully along in the shade of the fence, and had not been observed.

"I can't make it out," he said, conscious that he must not lose time, and puzzled at the almost death-like stillness that prevailed; "Where are all the Station men? They can't have killed 'em. How awful quiet it is! Who's that keepin' watch?" he muttered, looking eagerly forward. "It ain't Jim Pizey, and it ain't the Oysterman. Why, it's father! I'll go right up to him."

And he walked away from the fence, towards the house. As he did so, he was seen by the sentinel, who gave a shrill whistle, and cried,—

"Stand!"

"It's all right," exclaimed Grif, recognising his father's voice; "Don't you know me?"

But the man did not distinguish what Grif said.

"Stand!" he cried again; "or I'll fire!"

"It's me, father!" cried Grif, running swiftly towards him. "Don't fire! It's me—Grif!"

He had scarcely uttered the words, when he was struck down by a bullet. Confused and dizzy, he struggled to his feet, pressing his hand to his side. In the midst of his confusion he became conscious of a terrible change in the aspect of the scene. A wild fury appeared to take possession of the place. As he looked round, dazed, he saw men running towards the house, and heard the sound of shots following each other rapidly.

"Who are you?" asked one of the men, seizing him roughly by the shoulder.

"Who am I?" the boy replied, looking about him in a bewilderment of deathly pain. The blood was flowing from his wound, staining the grass and flowers, and everything was fading from his sight, when he suddenly saw Alice. "Who am I?" he repeated. "Arks Ally! She knows. I'm Grif!"

And, with a wild shudder, he staggered forward and fell senseless at Alice's feet!

She threw herself beside him, and, tearing off a portion of her dress, she endeavoured to staunch his wound. By this time, the bushrangers were in full retreat, pursued by most of the men who had been engaged in the search for the children. Amongst those who stayed behind were Matthew Nuttall and his brother, and Richard Handfield. Nicholas had hurried into the house, to ascertain if his wife and daughter were safe; and he now returned with some brandy, which he put to Grif's lips. Richard, who had some little knowledge of surgery, examined the wound, and said,—

“He must not be moved, Alice. He cannot live many minutes.”

“Do not say that!” cried Alice, weeping bitterly. “Oh, my poor Grif! He has died for me! My poor, dear Grif!”

The brandy which Grif tasted partially restored him. Opening his eyes, and looking with a loving tenderness upon Alice's face, he pressed her hand which held his, and said faintly,—

“All right, Ally. Don't you cry for me. I'm her friend,” he muttered, “and her brother, too! She said so herself, she did.”

“Are you in pain, dear Grif?” she asked.

“Not much. 'Tain't worth botherin' about.

Where's father?" Turning, he saw Matthew Nuttall, and a look of recognition came into his eyes. Seeing that Grif wished to speak to him, he came closer to the dying lad. "Do you remember me, sir?" Grif asked wistfully.

"Yes."

"I want to tell you, sir, about them brushes and the boot-stand. You remember when Mr. Blemish set me up as a moral shoeblack? You was in the office, sir, at the time. I ain't ungrateful to Mr. Blemish; 'tain't likely I should be. But I couldn't get a livin', sir; everybody seemed to say to me, You got no business to be moral, you ain't! You ought to be ashamed of yourself for being moral, you ought! They was right, sir; it was out of my line, that's a fact. And one day, when I was very hungry, I sold them brushes and the stand to Old Flick for four bob. It was wrong of me, sir, but I couldn't help it—I was so hungry! Will you arks Mr. Blemish to forgive me, sir, and tell him he can get the brushes and stand back from Old Flick? Only he'll have to pay more nor four bob for 'em. Will you tell Mr. Blemish?" Matthew nodded in pitying silence. "Thank you, sir. Then I sor you the night you took care of Little Peter. You was very kind to me then, sir. I've often thought of it,

and thanked you, when you didn't know nothin' about it." Grif had to stop many times from weakness. He looked at Alice, then at Matthew, and motioning him to lean forward, said in a whisper, "I had it in my mind, sir, to speak to you about her when you sor me and Little Peter under the hedge, but I didn't dare. I'm such a poor common beggar! But I know what good is, sir, I do. She's good—ah! that she is! And she tried to make me good; but it was no go. You don't know what she's suffered, sir. I told you I'd made a promise, and couldn't break it. It was her I made the promise to, sir. And I've tried to be true and faithful to her, and I will—till I die!"

A gleam of satisfaction lit up Grif's face as Matthew Nuttall placed his hand on his daughter's arm, in sympathy with her grief.

"That's good, at all events," Grif said, softly to himself; "he ain't such a bad sort, after all." Then aloud, "I'd like to see Little Peter."

Little Peter was soon brought to Grif's side; he was tired and worn out with his day's wanderings, and he evinced no emotion at seeing Grif. But Grif did not look for any exhibition of gladness from the lad whom he had nursed and fed.

"How are you, Little Peter?" Grif asked,

patting the boy's hand. "He looks well, sir. You're never hungry now, are you?"

"I was hungry to-day," Little Peter said.

"He was lost in the bush, Grif, with other children," Alice whispered, in explanation. "We found him very tired, and very hungry. He will be well to-morrow."

"You found him, Ally!" Grif said. "After I went away?"

"Yes. Why did you go away?"

"Never you mind. I didn't go away for no harm. The young lady who was with you that night, sir!" he said to Matthew Nuttall. "I think it was a good deal through her that you took care of Little Peter. Thank her for me, sir, please, when you see her."

"Thank her yourself, my lad," Matthew said, beckoning to Marian, who came forward, and stooped towards Grif. As she did so, Grif caught the stone heart which the Tenderhearted Oysterman had compelled her to place round her neck.

"It's like a dream," he said, holding the emblem in his hand; "everythin' seems to be comin' all at once. This heart——"

"One of the bad men who were here to-night made me place it round my neck," Marian said.

"This is Little Peter's heart," said Grif; "how did one of them get hold of it, I wonder?"

"Have you seen it before?" asked Richard.

"Yes, sir; it's Little Peter's heart, that is—I remember losin' it one night, but I don't know where. It belonged to Little Peter's mother. When she died in the horspital, she put it round his neck."

"His mother, then, must have been poor Tom's sister," Richard whispered to Alice. "I picked up the heart on the stairs when I wished you good-bye in Melbourne. The night before Tom died he saw it and recognised it. The Oysterman must have stolen it from Welsh Tom that dreadful night. It may be a clue to the proof of my innocence."

Alice pressed her husband's hand, and motioned him to look at Grif, over whose countenance a change was passing. Richard knelt and felt his pulse, and Alice took Grif's other hand in hers.

"Grif, my dear," she said, placing her lips close to his face, "you see that my father has forgiven me."

He nodded. Her lips to his ear, her hand clasping his, were heaven to him.

"It is you I thank for it, my dear," she con-

tinued. "I am in hopes that all will be well with us for the future, and that my trouble is nearly over."

"That's good!" he murmured.

"I tell you this, knowing you will be glad to hear it. I tell you this gratefully, thankfully, oh, my dear! because I owe it all to you!"

A smile of much sweetness rested on his lips. "I'm her brother, now, and always, that's what I am," he murmured.

"He is sinking fast, Alice," Richard whispered; "he cannot live much longer."

"What's that?" Grif exclaimed, in a loud voice, trying to raise himself; he had heard Richard's words. "I mustn't die yet. Don't let me die till I've said what I've got to say! Will anybody fetch a magistrate for a poor cove? I want a magistrate, that's what I want!"

"I am a magistrate," Matthew Nuttall said.

"That's the sort," Grif gasped out. "You hear what I've got to say, and put it down in writin'! I'm dyin', you know. Take her away first," and he relinquished Alice's hand. "Stand off a bit for a minute or two, Ally, and take him away with you." He pointed to Richard Handfield. The husband and wife fell back, in wonder; but, although she

could not hear what he said, Alice followed, with her eyes, every movement of the dying lad.

"Now, then," said Grif, when Alice and her husband were out of hearing. "I've got somethin' to say with my dyin' breath. Will what I say be evidence? I arks you as a magistrate, will what I say when I'm dyin' be evidence?"

"If you swear to it, my poor boy," replied Matthew Nuttall, gently.

"I'll swear to it! All right! I'll kiss the Bible on it. That's swearin', ain't it?"

"Yes," said Matthew, whispering to Nicholas, who ran into the house, and returned with a Bible and a writing-desk. While he was away, Grif turned his eyes to where Alice was standing, weeping, and he continued to gaze on her lovingly as he spoke.

"All right, Ally!" he muttered to himself. "I'll make you happy. You shall owe it every bit to me. You want a witness, that's what you want. I heerd you say so; everythin' might go wrong if you don't have a witness. And I'm a-goin' to be that witness, though 'Eaven didn't send me!"

"Now, my lad," said Matthew Nuttall. "What is it you want to say? Do not speak too fast, for you are very weak."

"Yes, I'm very weak. I'm a dyin', you know, and when I've said what I got to say, I shan't trouble nobody no more. Fust and foremost, then, them coves as stuck up your house was bushrangers. Put that down."

"That is down. I can write as you speak."

"Jim Pizey and the Tenderhearted Oysterman was two on 'em. I kiss the Bible, and I ses, I heerd the Tenderhearted Oysterman say as how he murdered a man—a Welshman—on the diggins', and as how he stole Dick Handfield's knife to kill him with, so that it'd look as if Dick had done it instead of him; and I kisses the Bible agin, and I ses as how all the gang knows it was the Tenderhearted Oysterman who done the murder, and not Dick Handfield."

"You heard the man you call the Tenderhearted Oysterman confess to the murder?"

"I heerd him say he done it himself, with Dick Handfield's knife. I kisses the Bible on it. You've got all that down?"

"It is all written, my lad!" said Matthew Nuttall, gravely.

"And I furthermore ses as how Jim Pizey and the Oysterman wanted Dick Handfield, when they was in Melbourne, to join them in robbin' Highlay

Station——Everthin's goin' away! hold me up! Don't let me die till I'm done! The sky's a-comin' down upon me!"

The brandy was put to his lips, and he revived again; but the words now came very slowly from him.

"Where was I?" he asked.

"They wanted Dick Handfield to join them in robbing Highlay Station."

"Yes, that's it," said Grif, his voice falling to a whisper. "And as how Dick Handfield wouldn't. And as how they wanted to throw the murder on him, out of revenge."

"Have you finished?" asked Matthew Nuttall, as the boy paused.

"Yes—I forget all the rest," muttered Grif. "Where's Ally?"

"One moment! You swear to this?"

"I kisses the Bible on it."

"Can you sign your name?"

"I can't write. I can only read large letters on the walls."

"What is your name?"

"Grif."

"But your other name?"

"I never had no other. I'm Grif, that's what I am!"

"Raise him, Nicholas, and let him put a cross here."

The boy was raised, and the pen being held in his almost nerveless fingers, he scrawled a cross.

"Tell Ally to come," he said, as they laid him down. Alice came, and knelt by him. He was happy now. The false evidence he had given seemed to him the only good thing he had ever done.

"It's all right, Ally," he gasped. She had to place her ear to his lips to catch his words. "You won't have no more trouble. I've never been no good all my life till now. I want to kiss Little Peter."

Little Peter was brought to him. "Poor Little Peter!" he said. "I'm goin' away, and before I go I want you to promise to be moral. You won't be no good unless you're moral. Say you'll be moral, Little Peter."

"I'll be moral," said Little Peter, mechanically.

Grif gazed at the lad lovingly, kissed him, and turned again to Alice.

"Ally, dear, you said there was another world There is, isn't there?"

"Yes, Grif. You are going there, now."

"Shall I see you there, by-and-by?"

"We shall meet there, dear Grif," she answered, keeping back her tears.

"We shall meet there, we shall meet there!" he murmured, in a glad voice, and then was silent for a while. Presently he whispered,—

"You kissed me once; will you kiss me again?"

She placed her arms about him, and kissed his lips.

"It wasn't my fault that I wasn't no good. I only wanted my grub and a blanket. If any swell 'ad a-given 'em to me, it 'd been all right. I tried to be moral, but I couldn't be. I wasn't cut out for it. Why, there's Milly!" and he suddenly raised himself, and a bright expression came over his face. Alice held him in her arms, and watched the fading light in his eyes.

"And there's Rough. Rough! Rough! And the old pie-woman, too!" he cried, as his arm stole round Alice's neck. "What was it Milly said the other night? Oh, I know! Forgive me, God!"

And with that supplication upon his lips, and with his head on Alice's breast, Grif closed his eyes upon the world!

Richard Handfield's innocence was proved without Grif's dying statement. The bushrangers were

pursued ; the Oysterman was shot dead, and the others were captured. When Jim Pizey was lying in prison, Alice visited him, and gave him Milly's message. In that poor girl's name, Alice implored him to confess who had killed the Welshman. His hard nature was softened by the thought of Alice's kindness to Milly, and by her promise to take care of Milly's baby ; and, knowing that his career was over, he admitted that it was the Oysterman who had committed the murder with Richard Handfield's knife.

Here the story ends. If misfortune and poverty should come again to Richard, he would battle with them bravely, if only for the sake of the true woman who called him husband. But it is not likely he will be so tried, for Matthew Nuttall has been reconciled to him, and Richard and Alice live happily at Highlay.

Grif was buried near the Home Station. The husband and wife often visit his grave, and often speak of him, tenderly and lovingly, as of a dear and cherished friend !

THE END.

